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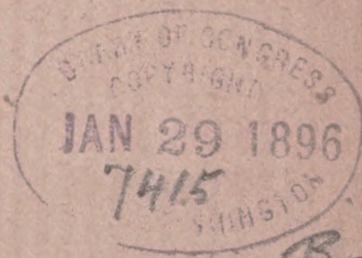
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IN SIGHT OF ST. PAUL'S.

CHAPTER I.

A DANGEROUS BEAUTY.

Raymond street, a broad highway of no particular length, leading from the Thames Embankment, is, as a rule, a remarkably quiet thoroughfare, with its large, handsome, old-fashioned mansions and its general air of dignified prosperity.

But, on a certain balmy night in June, not so many years ago, it presented a scene of unwonted life and gayety. Elegantly appointed equipages, filled with gentlemen in correct evening dress, and ladies gowned in the latest decoctions of London and Paris milliners, rolled over its pavements to deposit their inmates before the doors of the finest house in the street, a house which, with its awnings and steps carpeted with scarlet cloth, showed that it was the scene of some social entertainment of no small importance.

The rich Mr. Chichester, who had recently taken

possession of the abode in question, was giving a grand ball to celebrate the coming of age of his second and favorite son.

The Chichester family consisted of Mr. Chichester the elder himself, two sons,—Tom, now about twenty-eight, and Harry, in whose honor the entertainment was being given—and a daughter, Gracie, about eighteen. With them lived also a daughter of Mr. Chichester's deceased sister, a young girl named Aileen Millar.

The Chichesters had not always been wealthy—far from it. In fact, until only a few years before our story opens, they had been very, very poor.

They had resided in the North of England, living a hard, toiling, country existence, Mr. Chichester working away his life to keep his debts down to the lowest possible point out of a few acres of the poorest land, under the title of “gentleman farmer.”

Mr. Chichester, impoverished though he was, came of an excellent family, and was inordinately proud of it.

But gentleman farmer! What good did that title ever do him? The turnips and beets swelled no larger through pride in their gentlemanly growers. The rye grew no higher, the corn was no stronger and heavier with the weight of obligations to the blue blood of their cultivators.

Not a bit of it! The contrary was quite the case.

Bill Hodge, who drove his own plow, was an emperor compared to Tom Chichester. For the farmer who was not a gentleman flourished, while the gentleman who was not a farmer went to the wall.

But just when things looked their worst, there came an astonishing change.

Twenty years before, Mr. Chichester's eldest brother, after borrowing from him every penny he possessed, went to Australia with a cargo of smuggled lucifer matches and British brandy. At Ballarat, phosphorous and fire-water were at a premium. Their owner sold well, and bought better, converted claims into companies, led a respectable life, and finally, on his death-bed, among other sins, remembered his starving relations and his brother's loan. Signing his will finished him. He died the best hated man in Melbourne, but one of the richest.

The change to the Chichesters in England was enormous, and brought its results. Harry, his father's pride and joy, was sent to college, the farm was sold to Hodge, who knew how to make it pay, and the rest of the family moved to London, where we now find them celebrating Harry's birthday.

Mr. Chichester had been lavish in his expenditure. Carte blanche had been given to the best caterers in London, the house was superbly decorated with flowers in and out of season, and bands of music, hidden behind palms, discoursed their sweetest strains.

To crown all, the broad flat roof had been converted into a very bower of beauty, with myriads of colored lights, Chinese pagodas, rich rugs, and lounging chairs of every description.

The view from here was superb, overlooking the magnificent city of London, with the dome of St. Paul's, that masterpiece of Sir Christopher Wren, looming up grandly over all.

Here, about ten o'clock in the evening, we shall find the hero of all this gorgeous display.

Harry Chichester was a fine-looking young fellow, with a muscular figure, which showed that he had not neglected athletic sports at Oxford, from which he had just been graduated. There was a certain weakness, however, about the mouth and chin which, to a student of Lavater, would have marred his good looks.

He was not alone upon the roof. With him was a woman of really marvelous beauty. She was tall, lithe, and dark, with hair as black and glossy as a raven's wing, great, velvety, midnight eyes, that at times could flash and glitter curiously, and a clear olive complexion. When she walked, it was with an insinuating glide that reminded one irresistibly of some soft-footed denizen of a virgin forest.

Her dress was an extraordinary combination of black and yellow, and upon her beautiful neck and in

the raven masses of her hair sparkled magnificent gems.

Take her all in all, Cynthia Dell was a most alluring woman, and she knew it. She realized her own value, as more than one poor wretch ruined by her extravagance could have testified had he been so inclined.

Harry Chichester had been introduced to Mrs. Dell some six months before by one of his university friends, and, although he had a suspicion that her past life might not have been all it should be, from the very moment he first saw her, he fell madly in love with her. She was not a woman one could love with anything less than madness. The superb animal beauty of the woman made him forget all else, and he became her devoted slave, ready to believe anything she chose to tell him of her past and present.

Taking all things into consideration, there was nothing strange in this, but what was unaccountable was the fact that she fell more or less in love with him. Although she had constantly played with and at the dangerous passion, till now her pulses had never beat one atom the quicker for any man. Many had believed that they possessed her heart, but none had ever done so. And now at thirty, she realized with a sensation, partly amazement, partly self-contempt, partly pleasure, that she was dangerously near

caring very much for this handsome boy who was nearly ten years her junior.

It was at Harry's solicitation, and greatly to his brother Tom's unspoken disgust, that Mrs. Dell had been invited to this ball to-night.

At last the young host's duties in receiving his guests were over, and he found himself alone with the one who had become all in all to him.

He leaned over her as she half-reclined in nonchalant grace in a low lounging-chair, and drank in her beauty with his whole soul in his eyes.

Mrs. Dell looked up at him with a smile.

"At last, my dear Harry," she murmured, in soft, purring tones. "At last I can have you to myself for a few moments. Now explain, why scarcely one word all the evening?"

"It has not been my fault, Cynthia," replied Harry, piteously. "You know that."

She did know it, but she was not going to acknowledge it.

She shrugged her gleaming shoulders, and a pout appeared upon her scarlet lips. Then she slowly twisted her lissome body toward him, and looked at him from under her half-closed lids with an expression of reproach, which she had found effective upon more occasions than one. Was she serious? Perhaps. She could scarcely have told herself. She had been

an actress so long that she had almost lost the power to distinguish between the true and the false.

But her voice was very plaintive, with an undertone of rebuke, as she said:

"You found plenty of opportunity to talk to that girl, Aileen Millar." She moved impatiently, and drew her breath with a hissing sound. "I hate her!"

Harry flushed.

"You are unjust!" he declared, passionately and truthfully. "Aileen is only my cousin."

Mrs. Dell laughed, showing her superb teeth, but it was not a pleasant laugh to hear.

"Only your cousin!" she repeated, with a sneer she took no pains to conceal, wondering all the while if this sensation she felt could be really jealousy, an emotion of which she had frequently heard, but never before experienced. "Cousins, my dear boy, are always dangerous."

Harry saw that for some reason the beautiful woman, who had become the very sun of his existence, was out of temper, but he was not wise enough, as an older and more experienced man would have been, to draw a flattering deduction from this little ebullition.

He was silent for a moment, and then he said, in genuine trouble:

"Haven't I proved my love?"

Mrs. Dell gave him one long look, full of concentrated meaning, and then she answered, slowly:

“Yes, once you did. I confess to it. But that love may have left you.”

Harry started, almost as if he had been accused of a crime, and his companion, noticing the movement, smiled to herself, satisfied.

“Why should you think so?” tremulously cried the boy, for he was little more than a boy after all, but a boy very much in love, with that overwhelming, unreasoning, absorbing passion which does not come to us after we reach the years of discretion. “Have I not risked everything that I should have valued most? My name, my honor, even my liberty, for your sake? Oh!” with a gesture half appealing, half despairing, “I’ve become a tool in Gridston’s hands, and said yes to things that before I met you I should have dreaded even to think of. And now you accuse me of not loving you! You are wrong, Cynthia! It’s a shame! It’s——”

Something very like a twinge of conscience passed through the woman’s breast as she listened to these words, and yet, even with much greater reason, remorse hitherto had been a stranger to her. What will love not do? Surely the little naked boy, with his bow and arrows, has greater power than all the other divinities of Olympus put together.

Cynthia raised one white, jeweled hand deprecatingly.

"Hush! hush!" she interrupted, gently. "My boy, be prudent! But," with a flash from her splendid dark eyes, which made poor Harry's heart beat high with happiness, "you are forgiven."

Harry caught her hand, and pressed it passionately to his lips.

"But be careful," continued Mrs. Dell, after a moment's pause, and with an ominous tightening of her crimson lips. "Do not provoke me too far, or my love may turn to hate!" How well she knew herself! In that respect, she was certainly an apt disciple of old Socrates, though scarcely perhaps in the sense the philosopher meant when he enunciated his famous advice. "And if it does—beware!"

"I don't fear you, Cynthia," replied Harry, with the abject confidence every youthful lover feels. "You could never be anything but good and beautiful in my eyes."

For a moment, Mrs. Dell was silent. Her head was lowered just a little, and the rich color in her cheeks grew a trifle fainter. She was thinking to herself if this new, strange feeling which was stirring her bosom with a strength she could not overcome had only come to her earlier in life, before she had become so hardened and skeptical, what a different woman she might have been!

But with an effort, she flung all this aside, and, uprearing her head, looked once more into the ardent face of the young man who was bending over her.

“Do not be too sure!” she proclaimed, with a certain bravado. “You know what they call me? Eh?”

“Yes,” replied Harry, with a gesture of disbelief. “The Panther!” But you do not——”

Cynthia Dell started to her feet, her black and golden draperies swaying about her. For once an impulse to tell the plain, unvarnished, even ugly, truth took possession of her, an impulse which was irresistible in its intensity.

“You are wrong!” she cried, fiercely, her dark eyes gleaming and glowing like coals of fire. “You are wrong! I do deserve it! For, like the creature they name me after, I can be loving and grateful to those who treat me well! But once deceived, once tricked, or cheated of my own, my velvet paw becomes a clutch of steel! I caress no longer! I strike!”

And she raised her hand, the fingers open like a claw, her figure poised like some gorgeous black and yellow striped, wild animal, ready to pounce upon its prey.

Harry started back in horror, and then, his whole mad love rushing back upon him, he caught her hands in his and drew her toward him.

“Cynthia!”

Then the whole attitude of the woman who was known by the sobriquet of the Panther changed. Her face softened wonderfully, and her great dark eyes rested with infinite yearning, infinite tenderness upon the face of the young man which was so close to hers. Her graceful body swayed toward him as if longing for his embrace.

But, just at that moment, a step sounded on the stairs leading to the roof.

Cynthia's quick ear caught it, and she wrenched herself free from her lover, becoming instantly once again the cool, self-possessed woman of the world.

With a suppressed exclamation, which, if it had been uttered aloud, we fear would scarcely have passed muster in good society, young Chichester turned toward the stairs, and saw, emerging from the opening below, his brother Tom.

With the exception of a certain vague family resemblance, the two brothers were very unlike in appearance, as they were equally unlike in training and character.

Tom Chichester was a singularly striking-looking man, not handsome in the strict sense of the word, but possessed of a refined and intellectual appearance above the average, tall and well made, the mouth and eyes denoting tremendous pride and power of will, this in itself forming the greatest contrast to his brother. Curious eyes were his, dark-brown in color,

eyes which could flame with anger or soften suddenly when their owner was affected by some tender emotion.

They were very hard now, however, as they gazed upon the occupants of the roof.

And yet it was with no lack of outward courtesy, that Tom Chichester now came forward, and addressed the beautiful woman who was nonchalantly fanning herself with the bunch of ostrich plumes she wore attached to her girdle by a slender gold chain.

"Our waltz, Mrs. Dell, I think. And as for you, my boy," turning to Harry, and speaking in an intentionally light and careless tone, "the girls down stairs are going crazy. Broken vows for waltzes and unfulfilled mazurkas all over the shop. So off you go, and do your duty, like a soldier and a man—a dancing man."

"Thank you," returned Harry, sullenly, "but I'm sitting out this dance."

"But, my dear boy, you are the host. You must not neglect your guests."

"I prefer staying here!" was the rather petulant answer.

Harry Chichester was fond of his brother, and admired him immensely, but he did not like anything that savored of dictation, especially upon an occasion like this.

Tom was perfectly aware that he would prefer staying there, but at the same time he did not pro-

pose to let him. But he gave no sign of this determination as he answered, with a careless glance at Mrs. Dell, who was regarding the two with a half-amused, half-provoked smile:

“Of course you do. So should I.”

At this Cynthia stopped the slow movement of her fan, and remarked, with lazy sarcasm:

“Thank you.”

The Panther, with her remarkable keenness of perception, was quite aware, and had been for some time, that her young lover's brother was no friend of hers, and she felt now a vague foreboding not un-mixed with apprehension, that a struggle was impending between her and Tom Chichester.

“Don't mention it,” replied Tom, quietly. Then, turning to his brother, he said, smiling, and with nothing of dictation in his manner: “Honestly, old chap, you must go, and be a martyr. Besides, you like it—we all like it. Putting an arm about a pretty woman's waist is one of the most delightful sensations in the world, unless—unless she has a pin in her sash.” He laughed at the idea, a laugh which was not echoed, however, by either Harry or Mrs. Dell. Then, he added, seriously: “And, moreover, Aileen told me to find you. You promised to take her in to supper, you know.”

An angry look swept across Cynthia's face, only immediately to vanish. Aileen again!

Harry looked hesitatingly from one to the other, and then said, helplessly:

"Well, I suppose there's nothing else to be done."

"That's right! Do your duty!" declared Tom, cheerily and approvingly; and then he turned away and walked slowly over to the edge of the roof.

As soon as his back was toward them, his brother turned like a flash to Mrs. Dell.

"I shall see you home, of course?" he murmured, beseechingly.

"Not to-night," returned Cynthia, coldly.

She was annoyed at him for obeying so promptly his brother's behest, and jealous into the bargain.

"Cynthia!"

"Be careful!" warned Mrs. Dell, in a low voice, glancing toward Tom. "Go and do your duty, Mr. Harry. But," and there was a certain icy menace in her tone, "remember, you take me into supper, not Aileen."

Now Harry knew that it had been arranged that he should escort his cousin, and for a moment he hesitated.

"I insist!" added Cynthia, firmly, but in the same suppressed voice.

At once all Harry's hesitancy vanished.

He caught her hand and pressed it fervently to his lips.

"As you will! Only love me! Only love me!"

Cynthia made no reply, but the look she bent upon him spoke more than words could have done, and, with a lightened heart, Harry hurried away to do his duty.

After he had gone, Mrs. Dell glanced toward the motionless figure that stood at the edge of the parapet with its back toward her.

Her lips closed tightly and her eyes contracted until the lids nearly came together, giving a peculiar snake-like appearance to her face. How she hated that man! She knew he was her enemy and would defeat her plans if he could. Then too, how much did he know? Well, if the preliminary struggle had to take place, as was inevitable, it might as well take place now. The suspense should end at once.

With an effort, she forced herself to regain her normal composure.

"Mr. Chichester!" she called, sweetly.

Tom turned at once and came toward her.

"I really beg your pardon," he said, politely, if a little coldly. "Shall we go to the dancing-room?" and he offered his arm.

"No, thank you," replied Cynthia, quite as courteously. "I prefer to talk."

So did Tom. That was exactly what he wanted. But he scarcely understood why it was her wish. He raised his eyes to her face, and a look flashed between the two, very much such a look as would pass be-

tween two duelists just before the swords were crossed.

It was only for an instant, and before Tom really realized the significance of the glance, Mrs. Dell's whole manner had changed.

As has been intimated before, she was a superb actress, and she had decided at once the part she would play, at least in the beginning of the impending encounter.

"Mr. Chichester, why do you dislike me so much?" she asked, with a suddenness which was absolutely startling.

For an instant Tom was completely taken aback.

"I—really——" he stammered. "You are mistaken."

"No, I am not," replied Cynthia, with the utmost decision, and yet cleverly allowing a soupcon of regret to creep into her tone. "But," with a sigh, "as you will not be candid with me, I will with you. You dislike me because you are afraid of me."

Blunt as the words were, and in a certain sense true, as Tom well knew, there was nothing aggressive in either the tone or the manner of the woman who spoke them. On the contrary, her whole attitude was one of sorrow and appeal.

She moved closer to him, her gold-colored robes gleaming under the black shower of her laces. Her scarlet, pomegranate-like lips, the rich flush on her

cheeks, and the lustre of her great dusky eyes, all made a perfect picture of its kind, and Tom could not but acknowledge its beauty, even while it left him cold and unmoved.

"I'm afraid of no one," he answered, very politely, but with equal frigidity.

"Not for yourself, perhaps," assented Cynthia. "But," after a very short pause, "you are afraid of me for your brother's sake."

At this exceedingly plain speaking, Tom's surprise increased. It was not what he had expected from her.

"For Harry's sake!" he murmured.

"Yes, the pride of the house, the hope of the Chichesters. He is so fascinating, so good, so innocent."

These last words were spoken with a veiled sarcasm, which, however, was thoroughly apparent to Tom. He was glad now that she had spoken so plainly in regard to Harry. It gave him exactly the opening he wanted. He had been aware for some time of his brother's infatuation for the beautiful Panther, and he had determined to break off the connection. He believed now that he held at last the means to compel Mrs. Dell to yield to his wishes.

"Mrs. Dell," he said, seriously, "I quite understand the drift of your words."

"Really," with an enigmatical smile.

She was fanning herself languidly, and with appar-

ent unconcern, but nevertheless she was watching Tom narrowly out of the corner of her eye.

"My brother has been what is termed a little wild. But, considering his youth, and our sudden accession to fortune, is that to be wondered at? Now, we are celebrating to-night Harry's birthday and start in life. A start," speaking very firmly, "a start, Mrs. Dell, I am determined shall be a fair one, and not ruined or disgraced by a mistake."

Cynthia's hand tightened a little upon the handle of her fan, but she answered, coldly:

"I fail to understand your meaning, Mr. Chichester."

"A remark you made just now explains it exactly. I am afraid of you for my brother's sake."

"Sir!"

"One moment!" interrupted Tom, decidedly, but still courteously. "Harry is young, high-spirited, and, I regret to say, easily led. And he has fallen under the influence of a beautiful woman."

Cynthia smiled.

"Indeed!"

"That influence is likely to prove dangerous to him."

Their eyes met, and for an instant they looked intently at one another, each trying to read the other's thoughts. Then Cynthia asked, smiling again:

"Does he love this beautiful woman?"

"I am afraid so," replied Tom, with a sigh.

There was silence for a moment, and then Cynthia said, speaking very slowly:

"And suppose the beautiful woman returns his love?"

Tom had not the slightest faith that such was the case, but in this he did her wrong. Still he answered, diplomatically:

"Then the danger is a double one."

He came closer to her, and there was now a note of pleading in his voice.

"I am sure you understand me. Harry is desperately in love with you. Do you know what this means?"

"Happiness, I hope, to one of us," returned Cynthia, evasively. "Perhaps to both."

"No! Happiness to neither!" exclaimed Tom, realizing that the struggle between them was to be even harder than he had thought, but determined to fight it out to the bitter end. "With Harry it is an infatuation that cannot last. With you it is a passion that will pass as quickly as others have done, and die as soon!"

Cynthia grew suddenly pale, for she had no need of rouge on her rich skin, and the blood was apt to come and go, as varied emotions swept over her. At the insinuation in Tom's words, all her affected lan-

guor vanished, and her eyes flashed fire, as she turned savagely upon him:

"You dare!" she hissed, between her clinched teeth.

"Anything to save my brother," replied Tom, calmly and incisively. "And in his interests, I must ask you not to see him again after to-night."

The Panther's temper was roused, and in her anger she tore the feathers recklessly from her fan. She was not accustomed to be dictated to.

"Stop! stop!" she cried, warningly.

But Tom had gone too far to retreat now, even if he had had any desire to do so.

"If you promise me this," he said, "yes, I will stop. If not, I must continue."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Cynthia, a premonition of approaching evil thrilling her for an instant, but, almost immediately, she threw back her haughty head, and continued, defiantly: "Why should I? No! I'll not promise!"

"I am sorry," returned Tom, simply, "for I wished to spare you."

For all response, Cynthia turned her back upon him with a disdainful shrug.

But Tom advanced a step or two and spoke over her shoulder, in the same quiet, but resolute tone he had used since the beginning of the interview.

"Some months ago, you first met my brother, and

little by little your influence over him has grown and strengthened. But, unfortunately for you, a reputation such as yours cannot be hidden, even under the cloak of respectability."

At this, as if moved by a steel spring, Cynthia turned and faced him. Her eyes were dilated with anger and a certain fear she could not shake off.

"Take care!" she threatened, in a gasping tone.

But Tom continued, apparently entirely unmoved:

"Nor an assumed name. Kindly keep as quiet as you can," as the Panther made a furious gesture. "I am sure you don't want a scene. I repeat," low, but very distinctly, "an assumed name, Mrs. Fretly Burnsides."

Cynthia turned livid. She uttered a smothered cry of rage and despair, and for an instant Tom thought that she was about to spring upon him. Then she staggered back, almost falling. Tom sprang to her side, but recovering herself, she glared at him and waved him back.

Then she sank limply down into a chair which chanced to be close at hand, her rich robes trailing about her.

Tom could not but pity her, but there was too much at stake for him to yield to any such sentiment.

After waiting a moment or two, he spoke again.

"The fact that led to this discovery is, that among the many men introduced here by your friend, Cap-

tain Gridston, there happened to be one or two gentlemen. This may have been accidental'' (Tom could not refrain from this bit of sarcasm, for he thoroughly disliked and distrusted the man named Gridston) ''but, nevertheless, it was so. And these gentlemen recognized you and warned me. In justice to you, I kept silence until inquiries had been made, and I received only to-night the confirmation of the worst I have been told.''

The Panther raised her head. The blow had been a sudden one, but she was not a woman to succumb easily. The color was now stealing back into her cheeks, and in her eyes there was a dangerous glitter.

''And what have you been told, Mr. Chichester?'' she asked, with intense bitterness.

''That your name is not Mrs. Dell, but Burnsides; that you are not a widow, but the wife of a man who is suffering for a crime committed in order to feed your extravagances.''

Every word of this was true, and there was even more that might have been said. No one knew this better than the Panther herself. But, nevertheless, she started to her feet, exclaiming, boldly, and with well-assumed indignation:

''Your charge is an infamous one!''

''I regret that it is true,''' said Tom, quietly.

Cynthia gave him one swift look, and then laughed

hoarsely, making no further effort to defend herself, or deny his charges.

"Spare your pity!" she said, contemptuously. "Keep it for others who may need it! Ha! ha! ha! Mr. Chichester, really you amuse me. You are a modern curiosity, a man who loves his brother."

"And respects his sister," meaningly.

Cynthia understood, and her rage increased. Then, suddenly, a thought came to her, and she threw back her head, laughing aloud, with sinister and savage laughter.

She had a weapon with which to strike this man, who had dared to humiliate and threaten her, this man whom she hated, and strike she would, mercilessly, full at his heart.

"Your sister!" she cried. "Yes! And how about your cousin? How about Miss Aileen Millar? The girl who is dancing with your brother's arm around her waist? The girl your father wishes to marry his favorite son, your dearly cherished brother? Has she no share in your anxiety to get rid of me?"

"Be silent!" commanded Tom, drawing his breath hard.

"I'll not!" she retorted, defiantly, advancing toward him with that peculiarly sinuous motion, so suggestive of the animal whose name she bore. "I know your secret! This girl that your father wishes your brother to make his wife—*you love!*"

The blow struck home. Tom turned pale to the lips.

“For Heaven’s sake!” he muttered, striving to recover himself.

But the Panther paid no attention to his appeal. It was not in her nature to show mercy.

“With all your heart and soul!” rang out the scoffing, victorious voice. “You love her! But there is a barrier between you—your brother! I can clear that barrier away, and like a fool, you order me out of the house! You speak of my passion dying quickly—your love has never existed! Madre mia!” striking her hands passionately together. “If I were a man and coveted a woman’s heart, I’d have it. Yes, if a thousand brothers stood in the way!”

She paused, and Tom, still pale, but controlling himself, said, hoarsely:

“I require an answer. Will you go or will you compel me to expose you?”

“Bah! Don’t be afraid!” replied Cynthia, calmly, but with concentrated venom. “I’ll not come here again! Your—your *sister* shall be respected!”

And laughing maliciously, she gathered up her gleaming draperies and swept toward the stairs which led below.

Then suddenly her laughter ceased, and with a quick movement she turned again toward Tom, and

flashed upon him a glance of mingled defiance and hatred.

“But I warn you!” she exclaimed, in low, tense tones, the words cutting the air like so many stings of a whip-lash. “Be careful to keep silent about my past, for I have your honorable family here—here in the palm of my hand! And if you drive me too hard, I’ll not spare them!”

As she spoke she emphasized her words by extending one hand, opening it wide, and then shutting it viciously, as if crushing something in its grasp.

“You must explain!” ejaculated Tom, astonished, and alarmed as well.

The Panther flung up her head, her whole form quivering with rage and a wild longing for vengeance.

“I’ll not explain!” she retorted, fiercely. “Although it’s only my love for your brother that keeps me still. *Rob me of that, and I am pitiless!*”

CHAPTER II.

LOVE MAKING UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

After Mrs. Dell had given vent to this impassioned tirade, Tom Chichester stood motionless for a moment in bewilderment. He felt instinctively that there was something behind all this which he did not understand. Her words bore the impress of truth. She knew something, he felt assured, something which might bring sorrow to his family.

But, before he could question her further, and satisfy himself whether her threat was baseless or not, there came the sound of voices and laughter upon the stair-way which led to the roof.

In another moment there emerged from the entrance a group of three—first Harry, then a very pretty girl, Gracie Chichester, and finally, a broad-shouldered, stalwart blonde young man, in immaculate evening dress, with an enormous bunch of gardenias in his button-hole.

Mrs. Dell's arm, which had been tragically extended, dropped to her side, and she turned, with a forced smile, to greet the new-comers.

Gracie came forward with an exclamation of "Oh!

there you are!" then, as she saw the strained attitude of the two, she added: "Why, what's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing," answered Cynthia, quickly, the woman as usual being more swift to meet an embarrassing position than the man. "Mr. Chichester," turning to Tom, "will you be so good as to order my carriage?"

But before Tom could make a movement, Harry hurried forward to Cynthia's side.

"Mrs. Dell," he said, imploringly, "you promised me one more dance!" And then, as he saw how pale and trembling she was, he added, with tender anxiety: "Why, are you ill?"

Cynthia cast a swift glance at Tom Chichester, but there was no relenting upon his face, so she answered, slowly:

"Yes, a sharp, terrible pain. I—I am going home. Will you," to Harry, whose face betrayed the solicitude he felt, "will you kindly see me to my carriage?"

Harry extended his arm, and she took it.

"Thank you," she said, with apparent effort, part assumed and part real. "Miss Grace, Mr. Chichester, good-night. Pray express my regrets to every one."

And, with a smile which embraced all of the little company, she vanished with Harry to the rooms below.

Gracie, with a look of trouble upon her pretty face came toward Tom and laid her hand upon his arm.

"There's something wrong, Tom, dear," she said. "Tell me what."

"It's nothing, Gracie. At least—nothing you could understand. Where's Aileen?"

"In the supper-room."

"Yes, dear boy," put in the blonde young man, who had watched the preceding scene, not understanding in the least what it meant, but conscious that something was wrong, "she wants you to come and help her. There's a heavy run on just now."

"I'll go at once," replied Tom. "But," with an after-thought, "I say, both of you!"

The others looked up at the seriousness of his tone.

"Yes, dear?" queried Gracie.

"Not a word about Mrs. Dell's indisposition to my father."

"Not a word!" answered the others, in a breath.

"Thank you."

Tom kissed his sister and went below.

As he descended the stairs, his thoughts were not of the pleasantest. Mrs. Dell had said that she could ruin the Chichester family. What could she have meant? Surely, it could only have been an idle threat, and yet, for some reason or other, he could not explain to himself Tom was greatly disturbed at the thought of it.

He wished, too, Harry had not seen her before she left. Would she tell him what had happened? Tom, on the whole, thought not.

To-morrow, however, he would have a long talk with his brother. He must listen to reason. If he didn't marry Aileen, it would break his father's heart.

At this thought, Tom paused in his descent of the stairs.

How about his own heart?

Every word that woman had spoken was true. He did love Aileen with all his being. It was a love that had begun in his boyhood and had grown, increasing in strength, until, now in his manhood, it was an integral part of himself. How had the woman discovered what he had striven so hard to keep a secret from every one save himself?

That was a question he could not answer.

But, one thing he was sure of, and that was this: Henceforth, his life would be passed in a torture chamber, but, thank Heaven! he would be the only one to suffer!

With Tom's departure, pretty little Gracie and her companion were left alone upon the roof.

By the way, her companion deserves a more extended introduction to the reader.

Gillespie Fletcher—or Gillie Fletcher, as he was more generally and familiarly called—was a rising young barrister, not entirely dependent, fortunately

for himself, at this period of his existence, upon his profession for a living. From his appearance, however, no one would have taken him for a lawyer. He looked far more like a Guardsman.

He had known the Chichesters for many years, long before they had come into their fortune. His father's estate adjoined the old farm in Yorkshire.

Gillie was slow of speech and a little awkward in movement, but any one who, for these reasons, should set him down for a fool, would be very likely, sooner or later, to find himself most woefully mistaken.

It may as well be stated here that this blonde young limb of the law was head over heels in love with the pretty daughter of the house of Chichester.

He was always upon the point of telling her of his love, but somehow he never quite reached there, or, at all events, failed in getting a satisfactory answer.

Perhaps this was due to the fact that Gracie Chichester was just a little bit of a flirt, and was not quite ready to relinquish her freedom. She did not wish to lose the devotion of her admirer—far from it—but still there was time enough in which to bind herself.

"Tom doesn't seem quite himself to-night," observed Gillie, after Chichester had left them.

He spoke with a peculiar drawl, which was partially affected, partially natural.

"No, Tom hasn't been himself for some time," re-

plied Gracie, who had seated herself upon the parapet, making a charming picture in her ball-dress of pale-blue, as the love-lorn young barrister only too well appreciated.

"I've noticed it. It's a great pity."

"Yes. Dear, darling old fellow!"

Gillie's face flushed.

"Am I?" he exclaimed, in delight.

Gracie gave him one look, which hurled him down to earth again.

"I meant Tom," she explained, dryly.

"Oh! I thought—I mean—I wish——" stammered poor crest-fallen Gillie. "I hoped—that is to say—hem!" with a most lame and impotent conclusion.

Gracie laughed mischievously.

"I think I know what's wrong with the dear, darling fellow," said Fletcher, with a certain sarcastic emphasis, which, under the circumstances, was quite excusable.

"Do you?" said Gracie, interested. "Tell me. Perhaps I may be able to cure it."

"I think not," returned Gillie, doggedly. He preferred to talk about himself, not about some other fellow. "But," with a softening of his voice and an appealing glance, "you might be good enough to—to cure another dear, darling fellow."

Gracie made a moue.

What chances he was always giving her to torment him!

"I don't know another," she answered, looking up at him in the most innocent manner in the world.

"Where is he?"

Gillie struck an attitude which he thought most effective, but which filled his companion with amusement, an amusement she made no effort to conceal.

"Straight in front of you," he declared. "I'm the fellow, and I want to be cured."

"Why!" cried Gracie, stifling her laughter and forcing herself to seem surprised. "What's the matter with you?"

Gillie sighed, and then said, as sentimentally as he knew how, for, except so far as Gracie was concerned, he was really the most matter-of-fact young fellow in the world:

"Well, you see, I've an attack of the same complaint as 'dear Tom.' "

"Poor fellow!" with dancing eyes, but in a tone of the utmost commiseration.

"Yes, we're poor fellow-sufferers! I——"

But Gracie, growing suddenly alarmed at what he might say next, thought it best to change the subject.

"Don't you think this roof garden a capital idea of papa's?" she interrupted.

Gillie made a grimace of disgusted disappointment,

but he had learned too much from past experience to dare to make any complaint.

“Oh, yes, tip-top,” he mumbled; “so cozy—so nice—and—and quiet—I—I——”

And there he stopped, feeling as confused as an actor who has forgotten his lines.

It was really ridiculous, if it had not been pitiful at the same time, to see the great, strong, strapping fellow reduced almost to a state of imbecility by the mischievousness of such a slip of a girl.

Gracie saw it all, and was thoroughly enjoying her power, as a woman always does, when she knows she is quite safe to indulge in any freak she pleases.

“Papa arranged it through a suggestion of your American friend, Mr. Sheridan.”

Fletcher looked at her blankly. He was thinking only of her, and had forgotten entirely the subject of the conversation.

“What?”

“Why, how stupid you are!” exclaimed Gracie. “The roof garden, of course.”

“Oh, ah, yes, certainly. Good old Sheridan, bless him!”

With which rather inconsequent remark he seated himself upon the parapet, a little closer to his fair companion, perhaps, than he ought to have done.

“Mr. Fletcher!” cried Gracie, reprovingly, moving away a little.

But Gillie chose to misunderstand her.

Edging his way until he was quite as near to her as before, he said, emphatically:

"I mean it! Why shouldn't he be blessed for helping a poor sufferer to be a bit nearer heaven, eh?"

His gaze was so full of meaning that Gracie could not help blushing.

"Oh, Mr. Fletcher!" she murmured, casting down her eyes.

"Oh, Miss Gracie!" he retorted, taking her hand, which she made only a feeble effort to draw away.

Perhaps the whole affair would have been settled then and there, had it not been for the most inopportune entrance of a footman, who suddenly emerged from the staircase, bearing a tray of ices.

"What do you want?" demanded Gillie, impatiently, as Gracie hastily drew away her hand and retreated to the farther end of the parapet.

"Didn't you ring, sir?"

"No!" with explosive force.

"Beg your pardon, sir," faltered the discomfited footman, retreating to one of the little pagodas which had been erected upon the roof.

Fletcher cast after him a look of wrath, and then returned to Gracie's side.

That astute young woman was quite aware of his annoyance, but for her part she did not care in the least for the interruption. She knew her own power,

and was confident she could bring her big blonde lover to the point any moment that she wished.

"Isn't this a lovely view, Mr. Fletcher?" she asked, demurely, waving her hand toward the really exquisite panorama outspread before them.

But Gillie was too disgruntled to reply with anything but a perfunctory nod.

"I shouldn't like to tumble down there, would you?" asked Gracie, with a glance from her blue eyes, which immediately put his bad humor to flight.

"I don't know. I—I've fallen deeper than that."

He meant in love, and Gracie knew it. But, although she smiled and blushed a little, she pretended not to understand.

"Deeper than that!" she echoed, in a tone of surprise. "I wonder you were not smashed to pieces!"

"It does make me feel a bit chippy," he answered, slangily, but quite truthfully.

Gracie looked up at him archly.

"Wasn't it a terrible shock when—when you landed?"

"I haven't got there yet."

"Are you looking forward to it?"

"Well, it's—it's bound to come," asseverated Gillie, with a confidence he was far from feeling. "You can't keep falling forever, you know."

"Won't it be a relief when it's all over!" exclaimed Gracie, sympathetically, and as she felt a lit-

tle too encouragingly as well, for, as she spoke, she made a surreptitious sign to the footman who was standing in the door-way of the pagoda.

Gillie gave a start, and, looking at her smiling face, determined to accept the challenge as he understood it, and take the plunge at once.

“It all depends on how I land,” he exclaimed, eagerly, his honest face flushing with hope. “Now, if there was some one—some one I could depend upon,”—the way he spoke these words left no room for doubt as to who the some one was he had in his mind—“some one, you know, there to catch me.”

“Catch you!” repeated Gracie, as, overcome with his emotion, he faltered and stopped.

“Yes,” went on Gillie, excitedly, “some one who would hold out her arms, so that I could fall into them, some one who would exclaim, as she caught me to her heart——”

“Champagne, sir!” suggested a voice at his elbow.

It was the footman, obeying, as he supposed, his young mistress’ order.

Gillie turned with a start, and his face grew black—that is, figuratively speaking, for his coloring was too light ever to take on a really dusky shade.

“The devil!” he ejaculated, angrily.

“Oh!” cried Gracie, rising in pretended dismay.

And then she hurried away toward the staircase, stifling her laughter, and yet feeling a little—just a

little pity—for the poor fellow who was thus suddenly tumbled down from heaven to earth, and all through her own love of mischief.

As for Gillie, he gave one furious glance at the officious footman, and then, with a vehement utterance, more forcible than polite, he hurried away after his elusive sweetheart.

CHAPTER III.

CROSS PURPOSES.

"I will have an explanation! And at once!"

The words were uttered in a very angry and excited voice, and the speaker, Harry Chichester, was flushed and his hands were clinched tightly together in a not too successful attempt at self-control.

The two brothers were alone together in the library, where the younger had insisted upon the other following him, about half an hour after Mrs. Dell's departure.

Tom saw his brother was in no condition to listen to reason then, and he endeavored to put off the explanation until Harry should have become cooler.

"Not to-night, my boy," he said, gently. "To-morrow, by all means."

"To-morrow!" echoed the angry young man, contemptuously. "No, now! You have insulted a lady I—I respect, and I'll know the reason why."

"You are excited, Harry," replied Tom, his quiet voice and calm demeanor in strong contrast to his brother's agitation. "I have not insulted this lady. I only told her the truth."

"About what?"

Tom advanced to Harry's side and laid his hand kindly, even affectionately, upon his shoulder.

"You shall know everything in the morning, old chap."

But Harry was in no humor for delay. He roughly shook off his brother's touch.

"No, I'll hear it at once," he insisted, irritably. "I'm sick and tired of being treated like a child, of having you always at my elbow to look after me and preach what's right and wrong. Because you are my elder brother, you think you have the privilege to interfere with me; but to-night you've exceeded what I'll endure. Mrs. Dell says you've forbidden her the house. Well," with a sudden access of fury, "well, I'll leave it, too! I'd rather break stones than submit to your insults any longer."

Tom's good humor for one instant deserted him, and he said, sternly:

"Break stones! Do any useful work! But don't break your father's heart!"

Harry scowled, and his lips became set. Like many weak people, he had in him a very strong vein of obstinacy, which he was pleased to consider as firmness.

As Tom looked at him, however, it came over him with a wave of tenderness that this was his brother, his brother to whom he had always been devotedly attached. At this thought, his face softened marvel-

ously, and when he spoke again, it was in the kindest, most pleading of tones.

"Come, come, open your eyes, lad, and see how foolishly you have been behaving. We all make mistakes at times, but the sooner the mistakes are buried the better. Think, too, how bright your future can be if you'll only grasp it! And—and," with a scarcely perceptible catch in his voice, "there is a girl who will some day be your wife, a girl that any man would give his soul to win."

Harry made a movement of impatience.

"There again!" he ejaculated, feverishly. "Why should my future be cut and dried for me in this way? Aileen doesn't care for me, nor I for her!"

This declaration, or rather the latter part of it, sent a pang through Tom's breast, and a most unselfish one at that. But, at the same time, it thoroughly aroused his indignation.

"You speak like this because you are infatuated with Mrs. Dell!" he exclaimed, quickly and hotly. "Don't interrupt me!" as Harry started to speak. "You have driven me to a corner, and I'll tell you now what I know. Harry! This woman you think you love is not worthy to touch your sister's hand."

Harry's face grew scarlet with anger.

"By Heaven!" he exclaimed, furiously.

"She is unworthy to look your cousin Aileen in the face!" proceeded Tom, his voice cutting across

the other. "Her presence in this house is a dishonor to our mother's memory, and if she had not robbed you of every sense and driven you mad, you would have discovered, as I have, that she is Captain Gridston's mistress!"

At this bold statement, Harry, mad with rage, lost all control of himself.

He rushed upon his brother, with hand uplifted to strike.

"You coward!" he screamed.

Quick as lightning, Tom caught his arm before it could descend.

"For God's sake, man!"

But before he could continue, a white figure, the figure of a young girl, who had entered unperceived by either, sprang forward.

"What are you doing?" she cried, in terror.

Tom released his grasp, and the two brothers fell apart, Aileen, for the girl was their cousin, at once stepping between them.

From her appearance, Tom Chichester had not been far wrong, when he declared that a man would give his soul to win such a woman.

Aileen Millar was a little above the medium height, with a figure slight, but of exquisite proportions. Her profile, with the sensitive nostrils, rather full lips, and firmly moulded chin was as clear-cut as that of a cameo. Her heavy hair, bronze-colored with

gold lights in it here and there, was coiled simply at the back of her shapely head, while her beautiful eyes of the color of English violets looked out from beneath long, dark lashes.

It was inconceivable that Harry had not fallen in love with this well-nigh perfect specimen of girlhood, but probably the true solution lay in the fact that he was too young himself to appreciate youth.

"I'm sorry you boys have been quarreling," proceeded Aileen, in that peculiarly sweet voice of hers, that always reminded Tom of the chiming of silver bells. "Oh! it is a pity! And to-day, too, above all days. I am very sorry. It pains me more than I can tell."

Even Harry was a little touched by the reproachful sorrow in her tone, while Tom exclaimed, impulsively:

"Forgive me, Aileen, but——"

And then he stopped short in embarrassment, feeling the impossibility of proceeding further without saying what must not be said in her pure presence.

"Now, whose fault was it?" persisted the young girl.

But both stood with downcast eyes, and neither made reply.

"Both obstinate?" And then she turned imploringly to the elder man. "Tom, this isn't like you. Well, who is going to speak?"

Still there was no reply.

"Come, now, it's no use. You know I've always been the peacemaker between you hot-headed, excitable young men," with a pretty assumption of vastly superior age and wisdom, "and I'm not going to be dethroned because one is now of age, and the other—well, old enough to know better. Tell me all about it, and at once! And I'll decide who is to hold out his hand first."

At this, Harry turned toward her, his brow contracted in a heavy frown.

"I'll never take his hand again!" he declared, sullenly.

"Oh, Harry!" cried Aileen, in a shocked, distressed tone. "Don't, don't speak like that! You forget he is your brother!"

"I wish I could!" was the bitter response. "I can't believe the same blood is in us. I hate myself for belonging to the same race!"

"Oh, hush! hush!" cried Aileen, with a shudder.

"Harry!" broke simultaneously from Tom's lips, in genuine horror.

But the headstrong young man was not to be placated. He had worked himself up to a feeling that he had been outraged and insulted, and he was in no mood for reconciliation.

"He has said to me to-night what I will never forgive," he exclaimed to Aileen, with a fury he made

no effort to control. "Don't ask me for an explanation! Ask my elder brother! Let him tell you what he has done, if he dares!" with a sneer. "As for myself, I shall never speak to him again!"

And, without waiting for anything further, he wheeled about, flung open the door, and dashed out of the room.

Aileen made a movement to follow him, and then she stopped suddenly, and, turning, looked at Tom, who was standing with bent head, his whole attitude one of extreme dejection.

An expression of pity and perhaps also something of what the poet says is akin to that sentiment, flitted across her lovely face.

She hesitated, and then, slowly crossing the room, touched him gently on the arm.

"Tom!"

Tom raised his head.

"Yes, Aileen?"

"You heard what Harry said?"

"Yes."

"Then you will explain."

"No, no," he answered, with manifest effort, "I can't do that! Harry was right—I dare not."

"Dare not!" repeated Aileen, thoroughly startled. "Then it was something serious?"

"Yes, Aileen."

“Very serious, Tom?” fixing her eyes with the greatest anxiety upon his face.

“Very serious, indeed.” And then, pulling himself together, and striving to speak cheerfully, he added: “But it’s all over now. To-morrow Harry will be sorry for his angry words, and everything will be forgotten. At least,” after a short pause, and with an involuntary sigh, “I hope so.”

But Aileen caught the note of despondency, and was far from satisfied. In fact, she was more worried than ever. She was beginning to realize that this was no ordinary quarrel.

“But you don’t think so, Tom?” she queried, striving to read his face.

“Well,” faltered Tom, in embarrassment, “one can’t exactly——”

“Then, why do you say so?” interrupted Aileen, with a reproach that cut to the heart poor Tom, loving her as he did with the whole strength of his honest heart. “Why are you treating this serious matter as nothing? Is it—is it—because you wish to spare me pain?”

“Aileen!”

The cry escaped from him before he could check it. She had guessed only too correctly. It was chiefly to spare her pain that he was silent, to save her the anguish of knowing another was preferred to her by

a man to whom, as Tom believed, she had given her maiden heart.

"You are too fond of doing that, Tom," said the girl, slowly, looking him straight in the eyes. "Don't deny it. I've found you out time after time. How often have you allowed Harry's mistakes to rest upon your shoulders to—to spare me pain?"

The color deepened in her cheeks, and there was something not far removed from anger in her voice.

"And how often have I seen through it all?" she went on, more quickly. "And wondered why you did it? Oh, so many, many times! I've let you think I was deceived, because—— No! I won't tell you! You—you don't deserve it."

Tom, his heart beating quickly, came nearer to her, until, as he bent over her, he inhaled the fragrance of her hair.

"Then it must be something I should like to hear," he murmured, eagerly.

A crimson flush suffused Aileen's cheek and neck, and she drooped her head. When, in another moment she looked up, she was smiling through her blushes.

"Well, then," she said, "the reason I have shut my eyes to your most transparent fibs was because I have sometimes thought that to spare me pain was a pleasure to you, Tom."

The sweetness of her voice, the glance of her lovely eyes, the closeness of her beloved presence,

all intoxicated Tom as with strong wine. For just an instant he lost his self-control and forgot everything save that they were alone together, and he loved her.

“There is no service that would keep grief or sorrow from you that I would not do,” he murmured, his voice vibrating with passion, “no danger that I would not face to keep you safe——”

In maidenly alarm at his vehemence, Aileen drew away from his side, a movement which Tom entirely misunderstood, and which, as if by magic, recalled him to himself.

Believing that her heart was irrevocably given to another, he had registered a vow that she should never guess his secret, and yet he had nearly betrayed himself.

“Very kind,” interrupted Aileen, nervously, “and good and brave. But it must stop, Tom. I’ll allow it no longer. It must stop at once.” She paused a second, and then went on, in a firmer voice, reverting again to the subject first under discussion between them, and, regaining her self-possession, as she remembered the importance of it: “This time I mean to know the truth of your dispute. Come, I’ll try to help you. Was it money? Is Harry in debt again?”

“I’d rather not tell,” replied Tom, once more outwardly calm as usual.

“But you must tell me,” persisted Aileen. “You know Harry is very dear to me.”

A pang shot through Tom's breast. It was hard, bitterly hard, to hear this confession from her own lips. But still he managed to answer, bravely, if just a little bitterly:

"Yes, I know that."

"And you, too, Tom, I—I—esteem you very much indeed."

"I hope so," suppressing a sigh.

"Then answer me. What was the cause of this trouble between you and Harry?"

But Tom made no reply. Indeed, he felt more than ever that it was impossible for him to do so.

Aileen was deeply wounded at his silence.

"You won't?" she exclaimed, with a touch of indignant pride which lent a lovely rose flush to her cheek. "Very well! I know what to do, then. Oh! Tom, I thought I could rely upon your word. Just now you said you would do anything to serve me, and the first favor I ask you refuse. You forget an acre of performance is worth the whole world of promise. Very well," moving toward the door, "I'll find Harry."

Tom started. This would never do. If she questioned Harry in his present temper, the consequences might be disastrous.

"Aileen, one moment!" he exclaimed, quickly.

The girl paused, and turned back.

"This much I will tell you. Our dispute was not about money."

"About what, then?"

"I pray you not to press the question," besought Tom, in deep distress. "For your own sake, for——"

He stopped abruptly, seeing the mistake he had made in saying even that much, for the expression of Aileen's face showed that her suspicions were aroused.

"For my sake?" she repeated, in a startled way.

Then she advanced a step or two, and looked at him keenly, her sweet face growing white and drawn.

"I think I understand," she said, at last. "You were quarreling about a lady! Answer me! Answer me! Oh, if you have the slightest regard for me, answer me! Am I right?"

"You are right," assented Tom, sadly.

"Mrs. Dell?" pressing her hand to her breast.

"Yes."

Aileen uttered a low cry, and caught at a chair to support herself.

Tom's heart ached for her, and it must be confessed, a little for himself, too. How she loved Harry, he thought to himself, with an inward groan. He was too blinded to suspect for an instant the truth. And Aileen, on her part, had not the faintest suspicion of what was passing in his mind. It was not strange, perhaps, that she should have mistaken the

cause of the quarrel, and believed that both brothers were in love with the fascinating widow.

Altogether, it was a wretched game of cross purposes.

Tom crossed quickly over to her, and with a reverent gesture, touched her arm.

"Aileen, now you know why I would not speak," and to the girl's distorted vision, this seemed a confession of shame. "This pang is a cruel one, but the infatuation will soon pass and the love for you must and will return."

Aileen started violently, flung off his hand, and faced him with a passion that startled him.

"How dare you?" she cried, in low, quivering tones. "Do you think? No, no!"

"Aileen!"

It was such a cry of pain that Aileen's tender heart was touched. After all, what right had she to blame him? She had given her love unasked, and it was for her to bear the consequences of her folly.

"I beg your pardon," she said, with an entire change of manner. "I don't mean to be unkind. I have no right to be so. It's over, and I'll return." Her voice faltered, but she controlled herself and went on: "Harry's health is to be proposed, you know, and I must be there. My absence would pain your father, and I owe everything in the world to his kindness."

She paused, and Tom would have spoken, but she motioned him to be silent.

Then she raised her beautiful, sad eyes to his face. There was new dignity in every line of her slender, girlish figure, but, when she spoke again, despair and dreary pain were in her tones.

“I know your father’s wishes in regard to Harry and myself, and I shall not disobey them!”

The words ended in a sob, and, fearing lest she should break down utterly, she turned precipitately and fled from the room.

Tom looked after her with his whole soul in his eyes.

“Oh, Harry! Harry!” he murmured, with a sudden burst of passion, longing, and regret, “what would I not give to be loved as she loves you!”

CHAPTER IV.

A CRUSHING BLOW.

Among Mr. Chichester's guests that night was a certain Captain Gridston, whom we have already heard the elder son of the house mention in connection with Mrs. Dell.

How he obtained his title, or what his profession was, nobody seemed to know, but, as he was always well dressed, gentlemanly in his manners, and seemed to have plenty of money, he had been accepted more or less graciously in society, and had even managed to be elected a member of one of the fashionable clubs.

There were several people, however, if they so desired, who could have told strange tales of the so-called captain, and one of these people was Cynthia Dell.

There had been a time when she had felt a fleeting fancy for the good-looking adventurer, for Gridston was nothing more nor less than this, and the two had been confederates in more than one shady transaction, but, although they still remained intimates, the Panther had long ceased to care anything for him.

This was far from being the case, however, with Gridston. His passion for Cynthia had increased, if anything, and the evident favor she had shown of late to young Harry Chichester had driven him mad with rage and jealousy.

He knew the Panther too well to venture beyond an occasional remonstrance, but he had determined that Harry, with whom he took care, however, to remain on good terms, should be made to suffer.

His plans had been well laid, and followed out with a Mephistophelean shrewdness, and now the night of Harry's birthday, Gridston felt that the time had come to strike, and that his revenge was near at hand.

To explain just how he hoped to bring about Harry's disgrace, it will be well for us to listen to a conversation which took place earlier in the evening in a retired nook of the conservatory between himself and another of the guests, one whom he had asked permission to bring with him.

This latter was a man of about forty, with a very bald head, and straggling side-whiskers of a sandy hue, and shifty, pale-blue eyes. He was correctly enough garbed in evening dress, but there was an unmistakable air about him which betrayed that he was anything but a gentleman.

"Have you brought the bills, Treacher?" asked

Gridston, after satisfying himself that what was about to be said could not be overheard.

"Yes," replied the other, in a disagreeable, squeaking voice. "That is, the one due to-day; the other can wait."

"Let me look at it."

The attorney, for such Treacher was, produced a pocket-book, and, selecting a paper from its contents, handed it to Gridston.

The latter examined the paper closely, and then gave it back.

"That's all right," he said, with a satisfied smile. "Ah, when you put your father's name on this, Harry, my friend, it was a bad night's work for you!"

"But a good one for us," suggested Treacher, with a chuckling grin.

"Silence!" commanded Gridston, sharply. "By the way, you would better find young Chichester, and give him the hint that you know all. Tell him the bill must be paid for, well paid for, you understand?"

No one knew better than the captain that the young man did not have the wherewithal to meet the obligation, but he could not resist the temptation to torture him all he could.

"Perfectly," replied Treacher. "But I don't know the young man."

"You'll find him easily enough."

The attorney hesitated.

"I hardly like doing this," he said, at last. "It's scarcely professional."

Gridston turned and gave him one look, partly scornful, partly threatening.

"Don't question my orders," he said, sternly, "but obey them implicitly."

"Um! You're a leetle autocratic, Captain Gridston," replied the attorney, in a whining tone.

"While I pay you, I'm the master," returned Gridston, coldly. "While you receive the pay, you're the servant."

"Perhaps you're right. Only slave would be a better word. Yes, we're both slaves."

"Both!" repeated Gridston, angrily.

"Yes, accomplices in guilt, my dear friend," answered the attorney, with more courage than one would have given him credit for, "accomplices in guilt are always slaves to each other."

Gridston frowned darkly and bit his lips; but just at this moment, others of the guests approached, and the conversation ended there.

In spite of what Treacher had said, he had no intention of disobeying orders. Gridston paid him well for doing his dirty work, and gold was the one god of the attorney's existence.

He managed to have young Mr. Chichester pointed

out to him by one of the servants, who, however, made the natural mistake of designating Tom.

It was some time, however, before Treacher found an opportunity of speaking to the young man alone, but fortune favored him at last, and he found himself face to face with Tom, just as the latter was leaving the library after his interview with Aileen.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Mr. Chichester, Jr., I believe?"

"Yes," replied Tom, politely enough, looking at the man, who was an entire stranger to him. "I haven't the pleasure——"

"No," interrupted Treacher, in his shrill voice, with a smile that was meant to be engaging, "that pleasure is to come. My name is Treacher, a friend of Captain Gridston."

Now this was not calculated to recommend him strongly in Tom's eyes, but still the young man felt that he could not be rude to a guest in his father's house, so he made some conventional reply.

"Mr. Chichester," said Treacher, in a confidential sort of way, "I would like to have a few words with you."

Tom made an impatient movement. He was in no mood to talk to this person, who had made anything but a favorable impression upon him. But, before he could frame any excuse, Treacher continued, quickly:

"Of course, I am aware that business on such an

occasion as this is scarcely professional, but the law must take its chances. Neither time nor place enters into the law's consideration."

Tom looked the astonishment he felt at this to him incomprehensible speech.

"Now, Mr. Henry Chichester," proceeded Treacher.

Tom started, and was about to correct the mistake but Treacher interrupted him.

"Excuse me, the right of speech is with us. I was about to remark that in addition to being upon friendly terms with Captain Gridston, I am also his legal adviser, and in that capacity I was going to write you to-morrow; but opportunity must be seized at any cost."

Tom realized that he was being mistaken for his brother, and, fearing instinctively that there might be something serious in the situation, determined to hear what this strangely acting man had to say.

"If you will come into the library, sir," he said, "we shall be more private than we are here."

Treacher, nothing loath, followed.

As soon as the door had closed behind them, Tom said, quietly, although anything but cordially:

"Mr. Treacher, you have apparently something to communicate to me. I shall be obliged if you will get it over as quickly as possible."

Not in the least offended outwardly by this curt

speech, Treacher brought to view the bill he had already shown to Gridston. He pushed it quickly in front of Tom, but without letting go of it.

"Do you know this?"

Tom bent forward and scrutinized the bit of paper.

"Certainly," he said. "It's a note of my brother's. I put my name on it to assist him."

Treacher grinned. This was what he considered a bit of bluff, and it certainly did not go down with him.

"And the bill, like yourself, is just come of age," he said, tittering at his own humor. "I mean, due to-morrow."

Tom drew himself up haughtily.

"It shall be paid to-morrow," he said, coldly.

"One moment," squeaked Treacher, turning the bill over and displaying the back of it. "Do you recognize this?"

Tom followed the direction of his finger, and saw indorsed upon the back of the note, the name of his father, Robert Chichester.

He started back, chilled with a nameless fear.

"Why, that is my father's signature!" he exclaimed.

"Humph!" retorted Treacher. "Are you sure of that? Look again."

Tom did look again, and what he saw served but to increase his alarm tenfold.

"Why—why," he stammered, his face very pale, "why, no! It's not his handwriting at all, but—but ———"

Treacher looked at him with insolent innuendo.

"Very well done, young man," he sneered, in his high-pitched, rasping voice; "very well done, but, as you say—'but' "

Tom, still with that vague suspicion, which was rapidly crystallizing into a certainty, turned angrily upon him.

"What do you dare insinuate?" he demanded. "Tell me at once."

"It's simple enough," replied the attorney, returning the bill ostentatiously to his pocket. "Bill drawn by—hem!—Harry, given by the same to Gridston, in payment of gambling debts. Can't be converted into cash without another name. Bill returned by Gridston to Harry, and sent back by Harry with indorsement all complete. Trick discovered by Treacher, but discounted by him all the same. Due to-morrow. And there you are!"

It was certainly a most lucid statement, and one of which Tom saw clearly all the ghastly possibilities.

"It's for five hundred pounds, isn't it?" he asked, after a pause. "I——"

"Beg pardon, was five hundred," interrupted Treacher, with an exasperating and significant grin. "Is five thousand. Sudden rise in the market!"

Tom, scarlet with anger, raised his clinched fist, and then, with a powerful effort, dropped it again to his side.

"Why, you scoundrel," he cried. "This is blackmail!"

"Very likely," returned Treacher, coolly. He felt confident that he held the trump card, and he was right, although he was mistaken in some of his premises. "Scarcely professional term, perhaps, but expressive. Good-by for the present," crossing toward the door. "Think it over. Chichester, Jr., unless I have five thousand in my hands to-morrow morning, I shall consult Chichester, Sr. Sorry for you, but this is a clear matter of forgery. You know what the consequences of that are. Good-evening!"

And, congratulating himself that he had attained his object remarkably well, Treacher, with a bow full of ironical courtesy, left the room.

Tom, who fully understood now the circumstances of the case, made no effort to prevent him. He was overwhelmed by the blow which had fallen so unexpectedly and so crushingly.

Harry! Harry, his brother, a forger! And this was what that woman's influence had driven him to! The knowledge of it would kill his father. But, he must never know it. Five thousand pounds asked for hush-money. But that was impossible. What, what was to be done?

As Tom stood there, utterly miserable and feeling how impotent he was to avert the disaster that seemed impending, there came to his ear the sound of voices from the dining-room, a little way down across the hall.

They were singing the chorus usual on such festive occasions, "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow."

What a wretched mockery it all seemed!

"They are drinking his health!" thought Tom. "I'd better join them, and speak to Harry afterward."

He opened the door, and passed out into the hall.

As he did so, he saw coming toward him the man with whom he had just been speaking, accompanied now by Captain Gridston.

Tom paused, feeling that they were in search of him, which was indeed the case.

"Mr. Chichester," began Gridston, as they came close to him, "I want a word with you."

"Go on, sir," replied Tom, coldly, although his breast was filled with foreboding.

"I find that my solicitor here has mistaken you for your brother, Harry. It is as well perhaps, however. At all events, you know of the forgery of your father's name to that bill."

"Yes, I know."

"Mr. Treacher offered on my behalf to restore the forgery for five thousand pounds."

"Yes."

"Well, I've changed my mind."

"What do you mean?" gasped Tom.

"I mean that money can't buy it."

"What!"

"To-night you brutally insulted a lady who is a friend of mine," said Gridston, speaking very slowly and distinctly. "The bill belongs to her, and she insists that it be met in another way."

Now, while this statement was not absolutely true, there was a considerable amount of truth in it.

Gridston had seen the Panther's early departure, and knew that something out of the common course had occurred.

He had hurried after her to her house, which was only a short distance away, and there heard the story from her lips, as she paced like an enraged tigress up and down the floor.

"Do you want revenge?" he had asked.

"Yes, yes!"

"Shall I bring this man to your feet?"

"Yes, yes!"

"No matter whom it involves?"

"No matter whom it involves!" she had answered, furious with the indignity which had been put upon her. "Only punish him! I care for nothing else!"

"I shall hold you to that!"

"You may!"

And with this promise, Gridston had hurried exultantly back to the Chichester mansion. Cynthia would have no right now to blame him for any steps he might see fit to take.

The statement he made to Tom caused the latter increased uneasiness.

“What other way?” he asked.

“The discovery of Harry’s guilt will most likely kill your father,” was the cold-blooded response. “It will certainly break the heart of the girl who loves him. Well, it’s a heart for a heart, with the lady who owns this document, and she demands her debt.”

“You’ll tell my father?”

“Everything!”

And then Tom, at the thought of the terrible grief to be brought upon his father and Aileen, did what he would never have done for himself. He began to plead for mercy.

But before he had finished, and while Gridston was listening to him with a hard, sarcastic smile, the door of the dining-room close at hand opened, and Mr. Chichester himself appeared.

“Oh, there you are! you truant!” cried the old gentleman, cheerily. “I thought I heard your voice. Where have you been, Tom? We’ve been toasting our brave boy here. Never mind, you’re a splendid excuse for another. Come in! Come in, all of you!”

Ah, captain, I thought you'd gone. Sorry to hear Mrs. Dell is indisposed. Come in! Come in!"

And Mr. Chichester, in the exuberance of his spirits, absolutely forced them into the dining-room, where, in the blaze of countless lights, the entire company was assembled about the tables, groaning with eatables and drinkables of every description.

"Prescott," said Mr. Chichester, addressing one of the servants, "some champagne for these gentlemen. We'll have another toast."

"One moment, Mr. Chichester," said Gridston, in a voice intentionally loud enough to attract the attention of the major part of the company, "I have something very particular to say to you first, that is, if you will grant me your permission."

Mr. Chichester looked astonished, but he could only answer:

"Certainly—as you wish."

"But, surely, father," began Tom, seeking for some excuse to prevent the threatened revelation, "you——"

"Silence, Tom," interrupted his father, not exactly understanding, but not a little curious. "Captain Gridston has something particular to say, and, as he desires to say it at once, let him do so."

If Mr. Chichester had any idea at all of what Gridston's intention was, he probably thought it was some little surprise in honor of his son Harry.

"Now, sir, I am at your service," he concluded, turning smilingly to the captain.

There was almost silence now in the room, as it had stolen over the company that something unusual was about to happen.

Tom stood with folded arms and compressed lips, feeling like a man on whom sentence has just been passed, and who knows there is no chance of a reprieve.

"Give me the bill," whispered Gridston, turning to Treacher.

The attorney obeyed, and, with the paper clutched in his hand, the captain once more faced his host.

"Mr. Chichester," he said, in a voice distinctly audible throughout the room, "I am sorry to communicate this intelligence to you at such a time, but I have no alternative. Will you kindly look at this bill?"

Harry, who had come forward, and was standing close to Tom, turned pale as death as he heard these words, and he clutched his brother's arm with a smothered groan.

"Hush! Silence!" whispered Tom, warningly.

Mr. Chichester, meanwhile, greatly astonished and intensely annoyed at what he considered a shocking exhibition of bad taste on the part of Gridston, had merely glanced at the face of the bill.

"Captain Gridston," he said, frigidly, "after all,

this is only a business matter, and I am surprised that you should speak of it at such a time. It shall be met, of course. I fear I have kept my boys too short, especially Harry. It shall be different in the future. Before you leave, sir," with a stiff bow, "you shall have my check.—Now for our toast!"

"Stop!" interposed Gridston, quietly but firmly. "I haven't done yet."

"I'm ruined!" muttered Harry, shaking like an aspen leaf.

Tom seized him and drew him away a little, to where they were comparatively isolated.

"Harry," he said, in a quick, excited undertone, "if I save you, will you swear to give up this woman and make Aileen happy? Your answer, at once."

"Yes, I will," returned Harry, ready to snatch at any straw, to promise anything if only this exposure could be averted.

Tom scarcely knew just what he was going to do, but, for the moment, Harry's promise satisfied him. He turned again to hear what was going on.

"This bill, Mr. Chichester," Gridston was saying, calmly, but yet with a faint ring of triumph in his voice. "This bill was given to me by your son in payment of a debt of honor; but it proved valueless, until—until——"

"Until what?" demanded Mr. Chichester, as Gridston halted in apparent embarrassment.

"Well, until your name was placed on the back."

"My name! Nothing of the sort, sir!" exclaimed Mr. Chichester, in the greatest excitement.

In reply, Gridston coolly turned over the bill and exhibited the back of it for his inspection.

"Then how do you account for this?" he asked, almost insolently, pointing to the signature.

Mr. Chichester gave one glance at the writing, and then he staggered back, his hand pressed to his heart.

In an instant, Aileen had flown to his side, while the guests looked on with breathless curiosity, conscious that something of more than ordinary moment was in question.

"Why, this is—Great Heaven!" exclaimed Mr. Chichester, hoarsely. "Tell me, some one!" with an appealing glance about him. "Speak! Explain! Unless you wish to kill me!"

"Uncle, come away!" besought Aileen, piteously.

"No! no!" retorted the old man, rousing himself. "I will know the truth! Captain Gridston, do you dare assert that this forgery, for it is one, is my son Harry's work?"

At these words of his father, Tom Chichester gave one swift look at the unhappy old man, another at Aileen's white face and trembling lips, and his resolution was taken.

Without waiting for Gridston to reply, he thrust Harry aside, and strode forward, with the magnificent lie upon his lips:

"No, father, it is mine!"

CHAPTER V.

HEART TO HEART!

It was a raw, chilly day in early November. The wind blew in gusts, and the damp, cold air seemed to strike to one's very marrow.

But Tom Chichester, as he walked along Pall Mall, with the collar of his shabby coat turned up about his ears, was thinking but little of the discomfort of the weather.

There was too much upon his mind for him to bother himself with trifles of that sort.

It was now considerably over a year since he had so nobly, if somewhat quixotically, taken upon himself the burden of another's crime.

As soon as the excitement attendant upon his declaration of guilt had subsided, his father had promptly given a check for the sum demanded by the holder of the forged note, and had then proceeded no less promptly to cast off his eldest son, peremptorily forbidding him ever to show his face in his presence again.

Tom, with no word of pleading or excuse, which, under the circumstances, was of course impossible, had at once left the house.

From that day to this, he had neither heard nor seen anything of his family or of any of his old friends. In fact, he had studiously avoided them all. By his own confession he was a criminal, and there was nothing for him to do save to lead his life as best he could amid new surroundings. His one consolation in the dreary days that followed was the thought that he had contributed to Aileen's happiness. It was all wrong, absurd, perhaps, but still there was something magnificent in his self-sacrifice.

When Tom was thus thrown upon his own resources, he had but a slender stock of money. This, at first, however, did not trouble him very much, as he felt confident of finding something by which he could support himself. But in the whirlpool of London life, a man who has been bred a gentleman, but with no particular talent or aptitude, has little chance even for bare existence, and this Tom soon found out to his cost.

Work was necessary to exist, but he could get none. And now on this bleak November afternoon, he walked down Pall Mall with the uncomfortable consciousness that his last penny was gone, and he had not the faintest idea where to turn for another.

As he was passing one of the clubs, in which this thoroughfare abounds, he heard his name spoken in a loud, cheery voice.

He started, raised his head, and saw just in front

of him a burly fellow, with a rosy, good-natured face.

From his dress he was evidently a cabman.

“Ah, Palfrey, is that you?” said Tom, pleasantly. Jim Palfrey touched his hat respectfully.

“Yes, sir. Would you like to ride home, sir?”

“Not to-night, thank you, Palfrey. I—I prefer to walk.”

And, with a pleasant “good-evening,” Tom hurried on, and turned the corner of the next street.

Scarcely had he disappeared than the door of the club-house was flung open, and a gentleman dashed down the steps, two at a time.

Upon reaching the pavement, he gazed anxiously in the direction which Tom had taken, and then, in evident disappointment at not seeing what he was in search of, he came up to the cabman.

Palfrey recognized him as an old customer of his, one of his “reg’lars,” as he called them.

“Good-evening, Mr. Fletcher,” he said. “Do you want me?”

Gillie Fletcher, for the gentleman was our old friend, answered, excitedly:

“Yes, Palfrey; that is—I want to ask you a question. I saw you just now, from the club window, speaking to a friend of mine, a friend I thought I had lost forever.”

“You mean Mr. Chichester,” said Palfrey. “Oh,

yes, sir. He's not above speaking to a fellow-lodger, although I'm only a cabman."

"A fellow-lodger, you say!" cried Fletcher, his face lighting up. "Then, of course, you know his address!"

"Lord bless you, yes, indeed, sir."

"Take me there at once," said Gillie, jumping into the cab.

Palfrey whipped up his horse, thinking to himself:

"A friend, eh? Well, poor Mr. Chichester needs a friend now if any one ever did, I'm thinkin'."

After a drive of a quarter of an hour or so, the cab drew up in front of a moderately sized house in a rather shabby street leading off from the Strand, within a stone's throw of St. Paul's.

Palfrey descended from his perch, and assisted his passenger to alight.

"This is the place, sir. I'll take you up to Mr. Chichester's room, sir, if you like. It's the third floor front. The horse will stand."

"Thank you, Palfrey. You're very good."

Fletcher followed his conductor, who opened the door with a latch-key, into the house.

"Follow me, sir," said Palfrey, beginning to ascend to the upper stories.

The stairs were narrow and dark.

"Keep hold of the banister, sir, and mind your head at the turning."

But in spite of the warning, as they reached the first landing, Gillie ran his head into a projection, ramming his hat over his eyes, which caused him to utter an exclamation not fit for ears polite.

As they went up the second flight, the sound of a girl singing in a fresh, clear voice reached their ears.

Palfrey, without knocking, threw open the door of the third floor front.

The singer stopped in surprise. She was a bright, fresh-looking girl, dressed very neatly in a print frock and a spotless white apron. There was a quaint, old-fashioned air about her which was very attractive.

"Why, Jim," she began, and, then as she caught sight of the gentleman behind him, she paused, abashed.

"This is a friend of Mr. Chichester's, Becky," said Palfrey. "Come in, sir, come in!"

Fletcher entered the room. It was a fair-sized apartment, plainly but comfortably furnished. In the centre was a table, which the girl had just finished setting for supper.

Becky Vetch, who was the landlady's niece, and, it may be remarked, parenthetically, Jim Palfrey's sweetheart as well, dropped a courtesy, awed by Gillie's appearance. It was a rare occurrence for such an out-and-out swell to appear in that house.

"Won't you sit down, sir?" she said, shyly.

"Thank you," stammered Gillie, seating himself

in the arm-chair which Becky rolled up to the fire, and beginning to smooth his damaged hat.

"Why, you've smashed your hat, sir," ventured Becky.

"No, I didn't," laughed Gillie, in a friendly way, which did much to set the little maid at ease. "It was the landing. When do you expect Mr. Chichester to return?"

"He ought to have been home half an hour ago, sir. I took it on myself to bring his tea up here, but I'm afraid I'll never be able to keep it hot."

"And the winkles are getting cold," added Palfrey. Becky twitched him by the arm.

"Don't mention the winkles, Jim," she said, in a reproving whisper. "They're not aristocratic."

"You don't treat me right, Becky," returned Palfrey, jealously. "You never give 'em to me."

"Hush, Jim!"

Meanwhile, Fletcher had taken a card-case and pencil from his pocket, and written something upon one of the cards.

"Palfrey," he said, as he finished, "will you do an errand for me?"

"Yes, sir. With pleasure, sir."

"Go to this address, ask for the lady whose name I have written, and give her the card. My message is on the back."

"Yes, sir. I'll be there in no time, sir."

And Palfrey hurried away, first blowing a kiss to Becky from behind Fletcher's back.

Gillie leaned back in his chair, and gazed into the coal-fire which was burning cheerily, thankful that he had found Tom at last, and speculating on what this discovery would mean.

Becky busied herself about the room, and, after a time, unconsciously, began to sing. Fletcher listened to her, at first carelessly, and then in delight. What a lovely voice the girl had!

Suddenly Becky caught his eye, and the ballad died away upon her lips.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she faltered, blushing and confused. "I quite forgot."

"Did you? Then forget again! If you always sing like that when you forget, why never remember."

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed Becky, still embarrassed, but nevertheless pleased at the compliment.

"I mean it!" went on Fletcher, enthusiastically. "I forgive the stairs for cricking my knees, I forgive the landing for smashing my hat, I forgive you for forgetting, but until Mr. Chichester comes, you've got to sing. Sing sweet and strong, and, while you do, I'll listen, and, and——"

He rose and approached the table.

"Yes, sir?"

"And sample the shell-fish."

"You, sir!" protested Becky, in a shocked voice. "You, a gentleman, eat penny winkles!"

"I dote on them," replied Fletcher, calmly. "Give me a pin."

Becky reluctantly produced the required implement, and Gillie at once sat down to the table and began to pick out and eat the despised winkles with evident relish.

"Now, then, begin," he said.

"Oh, sir, I couldn't," replied Becky, bashfully.

"But you must, and I'll choose the song. What shall it be? I have it. 'Winkle, Winkle, Little Star.'"

At this, Becky could not keep from laughing. Gillie joined in. And then the elegant club-member and the little lodging-house maid laughed together with as much abandon as if they had been two careless, happy children.

In the midst of their merriment, the door was suddenly thrown open, and Tom Chichester quickly entered the room, pausing in amazement at the sight which met his eyes.

Gillie ceased laughing, and started to his feet.

"Tom!" he cried, joyfully.

"Fletcher!" returned the other, drawing back a little.

"Oh! Fletcher be hanged!" exclaimed Gillie, impetuously. "It's your old pal, Gillie, who has hunted high and low for the last eighteen months, trying to

find the best friend he ever had—Tom Chichester! But I've run you to earth, or, considering the stairs, I should say heaven, at last! Shake hands."

Tom gazed at the outstretched hand, and the tears involuntarily started to his eyes.

He had been alone so long.

"Then you don't believe," he murmured, scarcely realizing what he was saying.

"No!" returned Gillie, emphatically. "And never did!"

"God bless you!"

The hands of the two men met, and they stood there silently gazing into one another's eyes.

Becky looked from one to the other, and then softly slipped away.

In another moment her sweet voice was heard outside. Becky could never refrain from pouring out her feelings in song.

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
In the days of auld lang syne."

Her voice died away as she descended the stairs, and then Tom released the grasp of his friend's hand. He staggered a little, and supported himself by leaning on the corner of the table.

"What's the matter, Tom?" asked Gillie, in alarm.

"It's nothing—nothing," returned Tom, passing his hand over his face.

Then, for the first time, Fletcher looked at him scrutinizingly, and was startled at the alteration in his appearance.

"Poor old chum!" he muttered. "How changed you are! What is it, old fellow? Tell a pal. You're as white as a woman, and you're weak."

"I've had a hard time of it, Gillie," replied Tom, almost breaking down. "I beg your pardon, Gill, but——"

"I understand, old chap," interrupted Fletcher, sympathetically. "It's all right. A fit of the blues. I often get them myself. It's the fog, it's——"

"No, no, Gill! But first tell me about my father, and my sister, and—and—Aileen."

Fletcher smiled.

"All right, old chap," he said, brightly. "I will, if you wish, but they'll be here soon to speak for themselves."

"Here!" cried Tom, dashing the chair behind him, and with the color he so much needed flushing warm in his face.

"Yes. Don't get excited, old chap. I've arranged it all. Your friend, the cabman, has gone to fetch them."

This was an astounding revelation to Tom.

What! He was to see his family—and soon? He had not dared to acknowledge to himself before how he had longed for them.

"My father!" he exclaimed, half amazed, half shrinking at the ordeal. "My father coming here! For what?"

"For what!" repeated Gillie. "Why, to ask your forgiveness, of course!"

For a moment, Tom was utterly dumfounded, and then, as a possibility of the truth implied in Fletcher's words flashed over him, he said, with a gasp:

"Then he has found out?"

"Everything!" answered Fletcher, shortly but to the point.

There was a silence broken only by Tom's heavy breathing. After all, he was not an angel, and it was an enormous relief to him to know that he was no longer resting beneath that horrible onus which he had lifted voluntarily to his shoulders. But this somewhat selfish, though entirely natural, sensation lasted only for a moment. Then he exclaimed, with a quick revulsion of feeling:

"Poor Harry!"

"Sit down! Sit down!" said Fletcher, who really had but little sympathy with the person of his friend's commiseration, brother though he was of that friend. "Tell me something of yourself. You've been a bit downish, eh?"

Tom, sinking into a chair, raised his haggard eyes to his friend's face.

"If it hadn't been for the good people of this house,"

he confessed, frankly, "I don't know what would have become of me. What is a man like me worth in London? He is a bit of humanity, no more, that must eat and drink and be respectable, and obey the laws. I should have done better to have gone back to the country, and worked in the fields as I used to. In this overgrown city, there are thousands who take the name of Christians, and yet make their fellow-creatures live as articles of commerce. I speak bitterly, old man, but truthfully. I've been through the mill, and it's crushed my heart."

Fletcher realized then something of what the poor fellow had suffered, and his heart went out to him with a burst of tenderness and pity.

"Then we must stick to it together, old chappie," he said, earnestly, and yet, with the reserve so characteristic of the true Englishman, feeling a little ashamed of his emotion. "With friendship's patent cement, we'll try to make a job of it."

The clatter of footsteps upon the stairs startled them both.

Had those whom Fletcher had sent for already arrived?

Not exactly. It was only their precursor—little Becky, who entered breathlessly, in her excitement, not having taken the precaution to knock.

"Oh, if you please, sir," she exclaimed. "Jim—I—I mean the cabman—has come with the most beauti-

ful young lady ever seen, that is, outside a wax-works. She wants Mr. Fletcher. That is you, sir, isn't it?" turning to Gillie.

"Yes. It must be Gracie!"

"Wait a minute," cried Tom. "My sister! I'll go to her!"

But before he could take two steps, a dark-robed figure appeared in the door-way. It was not Gracie, however. It was somebody far dearer to Tom even than his sister.

"Aileen!" he murmured, turning pale even to the lips.

As usual in such cases, the woman was far the more composed, at least outwardly, of the two.

"How do you do, cousin Tom!" she said, advancing, and holding out both hands.

Tom caught them in his, and then they stood motionless, face to face, at last, eyes plunged in eyes.

Becky nodded her head sagaciously. Her experience with Jim Palfrey had taught her something. Cousin Tom! Of course, anybody with half an eye could see that she wasn't his sister. And, with this deduction, wise Becky withdrew.

"But where is father?" asked Tom, tremulously, after he had recovered himself a little, but still with his eyes fixed devouringly upon what was to him the fairest face in all the world. "And Gracie!"

It was with a certain effort, in spite of all the reso-

lutions she had made to maintain her self-control, that Aileen replied:

"They had gone for a walk when Mr. Fletcher sent and said, 'Come at once. I have found Tom.' So—so," faltering despite herself, "as they were out, I—I came at once, but I left a message."

Now Gillie Fletcher, in spite of all his nonsense and love of fun, had a pretty level head upon his shoulders, and he realized that, at this stage of the game, his presence was not desired.

"All right," he said. "I know where Gracie—I mean they always take their walks—I'll soon find them. Good-by. I'm off!"

Aileen had crossed to the fire-place, and, with one foot upon the fender, was gazing down into the coals, determined at all costs not to betray how deeply this meeting, after so long an interval, with the man she loved but who she believed did not love her save with a brotherly affection, had affected her.

Tom, after a glance at the graceful figure, whose back was toward him, crossed hurriedly to Fletcher, intercepting him before he could leave the room.

"One word, Gillie," he said, in a smothered whisper. "Is—is Aileen my brother's wife?"

"No," replied Fletcher, smiling, but in an equally guarded way, "nor likely to be."

Tom turned white, and then the blood rushed hotly into his face, dyeing it crimson from chin to forehead.

He had hardly dared to ask the question, but at the answer, he felt as if the gates of Paradise, once closed upon him, were now opening wide before him.

Fletcher caught him by the arm. He realized that the time had come for him to speak, and to speak frankly from his superior knowledge as an onlooker.

"Look here, Tom, old fellow," he said, in a very low, but serious voice. "You'll excuse what I'm going to say. But, if you think Aileen ever loved Harry, you are—well, a colossal ass ain't in it, don't you know? Take a tip! There's another fellow she cares for! Think it over! Give the ass a chance. Look here," looking full in the face Tom, who was almost gasping with the possibility thus suddenly opened before him, "I've seen it all along. I'm a senseless idiot in some things, I admit, but," with force, "I'm not a damned fool!"

With these words, Gillie wrenched himself away, and before Tom, who longed to hear something more explicit, could prevent him by word or action, he had darted out of the room, discreetly closing the door behind him.

Tom, half stupefied, half overjoyed, stared after him for a moment, and then he turned to where Aileen stood, the firelight glowing warmly upon her graceful figure.

"Give the ass a chance!" he repeated, to himself. "Who is the ass, I wonder?"

It was growing dark in the room, and, with an instinctive movement, even while his thoughts were elsewhere, he turned to pull back the curtain to let in more light. As he did so, he came in front of a small table, on which rested a hand-mirror.

He paused, looked back at the glass for a moment, and then picked it up and held it before him.

"I believe the ass is looking me in the face!" he thought to himself, with a thrill of happiness, to which his breast had been a stranger for many a long day.

"Cousin Tom!"

"Yes, Aileen," starting and putting the glass down quickly, and turning to Aileen, who was still standing with her back toward him.

"What do you think of yourself?"

"Eh?" ejaculated Tom, foolishly.

Aileen broke into a merry laugh.

"Ha! ha! ha! I saw you in there," pointing to the mirror over the fire-place.

Poor Tom, thus caught, blushed to the roots of his hair.

Then, with a sudden and desperate resolution, he picked up the hand-glass again, and crossed to Aileen's side.

Holding up the glass before her, he said, half imperiously, half beseechingly:

"Look! What do you see?"

"My own face, of course," replied Aileen, trembling just a little for fear, or perhaps for hope, of what was to come next.

"Tell me," said Tom, tenderly, pointing to the reflection, "is the face there quite the same as that you saw in the glass this morning?"

Aileen looked up at him for a moment, and then into the mirror again.

"No, Tom," she answered, gravely. "Not quite the same!"

"How is it changed?"

"It looks brighter," she said, slowly, looking intently into the glass, "and not so sad."

"Happier, then?"

"Yes, Tom," with no hesitation, and speaking quite frankly and openly.

"Thank God!" he ejaculated, fervently, his whole face aglow with happiness and hope.

"Cousin Tom," interposed Aileen, as he was about to return the glass to its place.

Tom paused.

"Come back!" she added, with a sweet imperiousness. "Bring the glass with you. I want it."

She took the glass from him, and held it up before him, the same as he had done to her.

"What do you see?" she asked, wistfully.

Tom looked, and tried to speak.

"I—I cannot," he confessed.

“Then I will. Not the merry, happy-go-lucky Tom Chichester I used to know, but—” and her voice trembled and grew very tender, “but a man whose hair is whitening at the temples, whose face is gray, and all this I fear through what he has suffered.”

“Aileen!”

He turned toward her with a doubtful expression, as if he scarcely dared to cherish the new hope which was budding in his breast. He did not quite understand yet, or rather did not dare to understand.

Her beautiful violet eyes met his with truth and constancy shining in their depths.

When she spoke again, her voice was scarcely above a whisper.

“You see the face of a brave, true man, who, for his father’s sake, took upon himself the burden of his brother’s sin!—don’t speak, Tom!” as with quivering lips, he attempted to interrupt. “Put down that glass, and look me in the eyes.”

Tom slowly obeyed, and for a moment they stared at each other, as if trying to read one another’s very soul.

Then, with a burst of joy, her whole fair face flooded with happiness, Aileen cried, rapturously:

“Yes, I knew it! Though I never doubted it from the first!”

“You thought me innocent!”

"Always, Tom! The truth is mirrored in your eyes. This," pointing to the glass, "only shows the face, your face reflects your heart."

"Does it?" cried Tom, the blood surging through his veins, his brain on fire with the happiness he now felt was within his grasp. "Then, look again, and see what else it says."

He took both her hands in his, and drew her unresistingly toward him.

"Hush! Not a word!" he continued, with the utmost tenderness. "Look me now in the eyes. You say the truth is in them. Look closer; for my eyes reflect the whispers in my heart. Whispers? No! Voices! Voices loud and strong, and full of joy. Voices that say, 'You love Aileen! you love Aileen!' 'Tell us, does she love you?' How shall I reply to the voices? Aileen, darling, give my heart its answer!"

With a lovely rose flush tinting the delicate oval of her cheek, and her eyes shining with that light that never was on land or sea, Aileen gently released one of her hands, and stretched it out for the mirror.

She held the glass up again in front of both of them.

"What do you see now, Tom?" she murmured.

A little bird in Tom's bosom was singing a very pæan of ecstasy.

“Two very happy faces,” he answered, “very close together.”

“And the hearts are very close together, too. Tom, dear, tell the voices so.”

His arms stole about her, and he drew her close to his breast, both under the spell of that wondrous feeling, ever new, ever old, the most precious gift that has ever been or ever will be vouchsafed to humanity.

CHAPTER VI.

BROKEN DOWN.

When Becky Vetch knocked and entered some ten minutes later, the sight of the two happy faces told that discriminating young female much of the truth.

"Humph! any one with half an eye could see she wasn't his cousin," she said to herself, and then added, aloud, in the most innocent manner in the world:

"Did you ring, sir?"

"No, Becky."

"I thought you did. The gentleman who was here just now told me more cousins, I mean visitors, are expected, and I was to boil the kettle."

As she spoke, she went over to the grate and placed the kettle which she held in her hand upon the coals.

Just at that moment the sound of wheels was heard in the street.

Tom ran to the window, followed by Becky.

"Here they are!" he cried.

"No, sir," said Becky, peeping over his shoulder.

"It's only Jim. He's coming up."

In a minute or two Palfrey appeared with the announcement that the two gents and the young lady

were following in a four-wheeler, as they didn't wish to be separated.

"They're coming!" exclaimed Becky, who had remained at the window. "I'll go down and let them in."

But Tom checked her.

"No, you stay here, Becky," he said, excitedly. "I'll open the door for my father myself," and he hurried away on his errand.

"Sister—cousin—father!" thought Becky. "We shall be quite a family party soon."

Gracie was the first to appear, followed by Fletcher, who was laden with wraps and parcels.

"Oh! I'm so happy!" cried Gracie, running to Aileen and kissing her.

Gillie stood bewildered, not knowing what to do with his burden.

"Give them to me, sir," said Becky, at the same time deftly relieving him.

Then she turned and summoned Palfrey to come to her side.

"Mr. Palfrey," she said, in a dignified way.

"Yes, Miss Vetch."

"We're not wanted here, Jim," she whispered.

"Come away!"

"Anywhere with you, Becky," whispered in return her devoted swain, "and perhaps you'll give me a kiss on the stairs."

“The idea!” with a toss of her head.

But she did not look very angry, and it is safe to say that Jim obtained what he desired.

“What did your father say when he heard the news?” asked Aileen, of Gracie.

“If it hadn’t been for Mr. Fletcher, I think he would have fallen. He has only spoken once since, and then he said, ‘Take me to him.’ ”

Before Aileen could ask anything further, the voice of Tom was heard outside encouraging his father.

“Rest a moment, sir! That’s right. Lean on me, dad. Take my arm. Only a few more steps, and here we are.”

And then Tom came into the room, with his arm about his father, supporting him.

Mr. Chichester had changed very much since we saw him last at the time of the birthday party in Raymond street. His hair was almost white now, and he looked very, very feeble.

Aileen came forward to Tom’s assistance, and between them, they brought the old man to the fire.

“Father! dear old governor!” said Tom, tremulously, placing a hand on each of his father’s shoulders. “Welcome, and thank God we meet again! Shake hands, governor!”

“Not yet, Tom! not yet,” replied Mr. Chichester, speaking with difficulty, and with very little expression in his words. “I’ve something to say first.”

"Dad, I don't want to hear anything about what's past, so there's an end to it."

"If you won't listen," replied Mr. Chichester, weakly, and with a certain irritability, "I shall go away."

Tom, still with his hands upon his father's shoulders, answered, with much tenderness:

"Well, father, I'll listen."

Mr. Chichester tried to speak. He passed his hand nervously across his lips, and then looked about him. As he saw the others who were watching him, he appeared confused and unable to say what he wanted in their presence.

Tom watched him with the greatest anxiety. It was terrible for him to see his father so broken.

Fletcher, too, read the old man's thoughts, and he said to Gracie, in a low voice:

"Come and look out of the window. The view is immense."

Gracie followed him to the window, where the outlook, with the myriad sparkling lights of the great city, was really superb.

"Shall we go away?" murmured Aileen to Tom. "I can't bear to see him suffer."

"Go to Gracie."

Mr. Chichester had come close to the mantle-piece, and was leaning his head upon his hand, gazing vacantly into the fire.

Tom went over to him, and touched him on the arm.

“Well, dad?”

Mr. Chichester turned, his face working with agitation.

“Tom,” he said, speaking with the utmost difficulty, “since I have known who is really guilty, since I knew my life was wrecked by the love of a thankless son, and that a gulf of shame and hideous disgrace is between us and your brother, life has been a misery to me. Only one thing has kept me from——” He paused, shuddered, and passed his hand in a bewildered way over his eyes. “It was the hope of seeing you again. Harry is gone. I don’t know where he is. Poor Harry! Poor Harry!”

And the tears rolled down his wan face.

“Dad!” exclaimed Tom, almost crying himself.

“Over and over again have I repeated to myself what I should say to you if we met,” continued Mr. Chichester, shaking in every limb. “Your dead mother put the words into my heart, Tom. I knew them yesterday, I knew them as I came in the cab; but I can’t speak them now! I can’t speak them now! They’re gone, Tom,” looking up at his son in helpless agony. “What shall I say? For God’s sake, tell me! What can I say to you, my boy? What shall I do?”

Tom was deeply moved at this change in the father

whom he remembered so stalwart, so self-reliant, but he did his best to hide his emotion.

"Don't think anything more about that, father," he said. "Let me take off your overcoat, and make you comfortable."

The old gentleman made no demur. He was like a child in his weakness.

As Tom removed the coat, something fell with a clang from one of the pockets. The young man stooped and picked it up, and, then, with a start of horror, wheeled about and looked at his father.

It was a revolver!

Mr. Chichester gave one glance at the weapon, and turned shiveringly from it.

"Take it away, Tom! Hide it from me, for Heaven's sake!"

Tom, with a heavy sigh, turned to Fletcher, who happened at that moment to be watching them, and beckoned him to him.

"Put this out of sight, old man," he whispered, "and take care the girls don't see it."

"I understand."

Gillie took the pistol, and with his back toward the window, where the girls were standing, examined it.

It was loaded!

He looked round to see where he could hide it, and finally dropped it into one of the pockets of Tom's overcoat, which had been thrown over a chair.

There, at all events, it would be safe.

Then, he rejoined Aileen and Gracie at the window.

Tom put his arm around his father, and turning the old man so that he could look into his face, said, with the deepest sympathy and utmost kindness, and yet with a certain firmness:

“Now listen to me, father. I know what’s the matter with you, with all of us. We miss Harry!”

“Tom!” ejaculated the old man, shivering like an aspen leaf.

“Sit down and hear me out,” said Tom, gently forcing him down into the arm-chair beside the fire.

“Yes, we miss Harry. And, after all, he’s been more the scape-goat than the lost sheep. Well,” with determination, “we mean to find him and bring him back to the fold!”

Mr. Chichester half rose from his chair, with a cry of joy, which showed how close his erring son still was to his heart.

“You’ll find my Harry?”

“If I search London to do it!” replied Tom, and he meant every word he said. “And then we’ll live together again. And our home shall be a place of peace and shelter, where I’ll take care no one shall wound or hurt you.”

The strained expression left the old gentleman’s

face and his eyes sought Tom with a look of infinite gratitude.

“Ring the bell, somebody,” said Tom.

Gillie pulled the rope, and in a few minutes Becky appeared in answer to the summons, and was asked by Tom to send Palfrey up at once.

While they were waiting, Tom, assisted by the girls, made his father as comfortable as possible, giving him a pipe and the especial glass of grog he most favored.

Mr. Chichester, encouraged by Tom's promise to find the son he still loved in spite of all that son's faults, was more like his old self than he had been for months.

“Shall you want me, sir, this evening,” asked Palfrey, as he came awkwardly into the room, embarrassed at the presence of so much of the gentry.

“Yes, Jim,” replied Tom. And then, addressing Fletcher, he said, earnestly: “Gillie, to-night we'll start to find my brother. You'll help me, I know!”

“With everything I have in this world!” replied Gillie, promptly and emphatically. “I think I know where to catch him. Leave it to me! Cheer up, Mr. Chichester! You stay here, and within twelve hours, we'll have Harry at your side!”

CHAPTER VII.

THE ASPASIA CLUB.

The Aspasia Club, situated upon the Thames Embankment, was scarcely a place where a man would care to take his wife or sister. Still, it was a very magnificent establishment indeed, conducted with a certain regard to the proprieties. The gambling was sometimes high, but the proprietor boasted, and probably with a certain amount of truth, that everything was "on the dead square."

It was a place to which women were admitted, but none frequented it save those whom the younger Dumas has so felicitously described as belonging to the half-world. They were speckled peaches, all of them, but in many cases, it required a keen eye to discover the little spot which cheapened them and placed them in the second-class basket.

One of the most luxurious apartments in the club was the drawing-room, a little garish in its decorations, perhaps, but still very handsome. The walls were painted with elaborate life-size figures, representing the various gods and goddesses of mythological Olympus. In recesses were colored statues of As-

pasia, Lais, and Phryne, illuminated by amber electric lights. The hard-wood floor was covered with superb and costly rugs and the furniture was a glitter of gilding and glistening brocade.

At one side was a large plate-glass window, opening on to a broad veranda, from which could be seen a view of the Thames looking up toward London Bridge. Opposite was an archway partially veiled by rich portieres, through which was revealed a glimpse of the ball-room, where every evening fashionable men and elegantly dressed women waltzed to the strains of an excellent string band.

Nothing was spared by the proprietors, who, by the way, preserved a strict incognito, to make the place a success, and they were generally supposed to be coining money. It was certainly the most popular place of its class in London, and some of the best known names in society, among the men, of course, occasionally figured in its list of guests.

On the night in which we shall venture to introduce our readers to the Aspasia Club, the drawing-room was empty. The ball-room, however, was crowded with a brilliant company, and the music of a sensuous waltz floated on the air.

Suddenly the portieres were pushed aside impatiently, and a very handsome woman entered the room. Her gown of blue velvet and her exquisite ornaments of sapphires were exceedingly becoming to

her blonde beauty. Beatrice Moreland was one of the best known and most admired among those members of the half-world who occupy villas in St. John's Wood.

She was followed by a tall, thin, rather cadaverous young man, who wore a somewhat bored expression.

And, indeed, Dennis Sheridan, an American, who had made his fortune and come to Europe to enjoy it, was beginning to get a little weary of the ceaseless round of gayety and dissipation, and to turn his eyes longingly toward home.

"Some wine! Quick, my friend, or I shall faint!" exclaimed Beatrice, rapidly and nervously, as, regardless of the danger of crushing her superb dress, she flung herself down into one of the arm-chairs.

Sheridan went to one of the doors and beckoned a gorgeously liveried footman who was passing with a salver bearing bottles and glasses.

Beatrice feverishly drank off at a draught the wine presented to her.

After the footman had gone, Sheridan came and leaned over the back of her chair.

"You're not yourself to-night," a touch of pity in the high-pitched tones of his voice. "Why don't you go home?"

But at this suggestion Beatrice stamped her foot impatiently.

"No, no, no!" she exclaimed, emphatically. "I stay! Stay always!"

"And I know why—to see Harry Chichester. You'd better be careful."

Beatrice threw up her handsome head.

"Careful!" she repeated, with angry scorn. "Why? Of whom?"

"Now don't get angry, Beatrice," murmured Sheridan, soothingly, "but you know he belongs to some one else."

"Rubbish!" was the contemptuous retort. "No one belongs to any one nowadays! The wind changes—man tires, and hearts are broken. Round goes the weather-cock! Mended, my dear boy, till the next storm, and that's as it should be."

Before Sheridan could reply to this speech of caustic philosophy, a footman entered with a card upon a silver salver, which he presented to the young American.

Sheridan glanced at the card, and a slight expression of surprise appeared upon his face.

"Where is the gentleman?" he asked.

"In the visitor's room, sir."

"Say I'll come at once."

The footman bowed and departed.

"Beatrice," said Sheridan, appealingly, to his companion, "let me send you home."

"No," she replied, rising, "I remain."

"You want to see the Panther?"

"Perhaps," with a smile not altogether pleasant to see.

"Why?"

Beatrice looked him full in the face, half quizzically, half seriously.

"Because I think to-night the wind will change," she said, significantly.

And, with a defiant laugh, she swept herself, her velvets and laces, into the ball-room.

Sheridan shrugged his shoulders. He ought to have known the futility of attempting to reason with a willful woman.

Then he glanced again at the card which he still held in his hand. Gillespie Fletcher! What in morality's name did he want there? Well, the best way was to go and find out. Scarcely had he disappeared than a small door near one of the alcoves opened, and two men emerged.

One was the so-called Captain Gridston, and the other, his more or less faithful henchman, Treacher.

Gridston cast a quick glance about the room, and, seeing that it was empty, asked:

"Are you sure this information is correct?"

"Quite. My man is to be relied on. They left their house this afternoon, followed by my informant to the lodgings of the long-lost son. There has been an explanation and forgiveness all round. Now," most

seriously, and Treacher was really serious in this, because he saw money accruing to himself, if his advice were followed. "Now, the best thing you can do is to marry Miss Millar, with her fortune, as soon as you can. Don't lose time! Marry her!"

And the tricky lawyer darted away, leaving the seed he had sown to germinate.

Gridston started to follow him, and then stopped. This was not quite a new idea to him, but it was the first time it had been put into words.

Marry her! Well, it was worth trying, perhaps, but it was long, very long odds against success.

He could not forget one evening when he had ventured over the line, and she had turned on him, her blue eyes cutting like a knife.

As he stood there, revolving these things in his mind, his solitude was broken in upon.

Three gentlemen entered the room.

"Ah, Sherry, my boy, good-evening," said Gridston, saluting the first, who returned him a careless nod.

Then, as he saw the second, he extended his hand with a certain surprise.

"Ah, Fletcher!"

But Gillie, with a slight uprising of his brows, ignored the proffered hand, and crossed over to the entrance of the ball-room.

The third man, however, was the one that really astounded Captain Gridston.

"Tom Chichester!"

"Yes, Captain Gridston," replied Tom, but with a darkening of his brows and an ominous tightening of his lips.

"What business have you here?" demanded Gridston, casting all diplomacy to the winds.

"That is a question you have no right to put," answered Tom, quietly, but with a certain dangerous intensity. "Unless," after a pause impregnated with meaning, "unless, as is more than likely, you are the proprietor of this very desirable establishment."

It was very evident that Tom was in no frame of mind to mince his words, and, as a matter of fact, there was more truth than poetry in his statement. He had been brought to the Aspasia Club by Gillie, who had a pretty clear idea that Harry would be found there; and he was determined to discover his brother, in spite of any obstacles that might intervene.

"Whatever this establishment may be," replied Gridston, angrily, "we draw the line at fel——"

But before he could complete the word, Tom thundered, with clinched fist:

"Stop! or I'll strike you down where you stand!"

Gridston thought discretion the better part of valor, but, nevertheless, he turned fiercely upon Sheridan.

"Did you introduce these men?"

"No," interrupted Fletcher, stepping forward, and speaking in his most aggravating and aggravated drawl. "The men introduced themselves. We have the right to do so."

"Eh?" ejaculated Gridston, taken aback, and gnawing his under lip in impotent rage.

"Yes," went on Gillie, with the calmest and most provoking insolence, "we called to see our friend, Harry. We were nominated at once, and seconded by the hall porter. A committee of emergency was called upon the door-mat. We were elected, and paid our subscriptions, all under three minutes and a half. And," with a patronizing glance about him, "a very snug place we've got into—most select."

Gridston ground his teeth in anger.

"I congratulate you," he snapped, crossing to go into the ball-room and so escape these veiled insults, which, under the circumstances, he could not resent.

But Tom stopped him.

"One moment," he said, stepping in front of him. "You doubtless guess the reason I'm here. Where's my brother?"

"Find out!" snarled Gridston.

"I mean to! And you've got to help me!"

"Really!" with a sneering smile.

"Yes," asseverated Tom, sternly. "He's still un-

der the influence of that woman. You know where she lives. Give me her address!"

"I'll see you hanged first!" almost screamed Gridston.

And, before any of the three could guess his intention or make move to prevent him, he darted away suddenly, and disappeared through the little door beside the alcove which contained the statue of Aspasia.

Tom rushed after him, but it was too late. The door had closed with a click behind the fugitive, and it was securely locked.

"That's the private exit to the street," remarked Sheridan, "only to be used in case of need."

"Then he can't escape!" cried Tom. "Palfrey is in the street outside with his cab. I'll watch for Gridston there. I promised them I'd save Harry, and I'll keep my word."

And, without waiting to hear aught from the others, he rushed away to watch the exterior of the club.

"Are you going, too?" asked the American, phlegmatically, of Fletcher.

Gillie considered the matter for a moment, and then replied:

"Not a bit of it! I've paid my subscription, and, hang it! I'm going to see the fun!"

There was more method in this declaration than

was apparent. Gillie thought if there was one outside, it was just as well to have one inside.

But he did not see any necessity for explaining this to Sheridan, good fellow though he knew him to be.

He linked his arm in that of the American, and drew him away into the ball-room.

Gridston was altogether too clever to continue on his way to the street. He had no desire to have any further controversy with Tom Chichester. He therefore returned by a roundabout way to the ball-room.

But just before he reached there, in one of the hallways he came face to face with Treacher.

The lawyer was evidently very much excited. He rushed up to Gridston, and clutched him by the arm.

"Thank Heaven! I've found you! Do you know who is here?"

"Oh, yes, I know," replied Gridston, impatiently. "Tom Chichester! He's no one!" with a scorn he was really far from feeling inwardly.

"But some one else is!" retorted Treacher. "And that some one else is—Fretly Burnsides!"

"What!" cried Gridston, starting back, and his attention now thoroughly aroused.

"Yes, her husband," continued Treacher, with suppressed excitement, an excitement which, by the way, was thoroughly justified. "The man who was sentenced for the Landbeck Bank job, you know."

Gridston did know only too well, as the finding guilty of this man was largely his own doing.

"He was discharged last week. How he got here, Heaven only knows! He's half mad, half drunk, and he's found out all about Cynthia, and swears he'll do for the man who robbed him of her."

Gridston turned pale. His mind went back to the time when mad with love for Fretly Burnsides' wife, he had sworn that he would obtain possession of her by fair means or foul, and he had accomplished his purpose by foul means, it must be acknowledged, rather than by fair. He it was who, discovering Burnsides' embezzlement, committed through a desire to give the wife he loved, all that her extravagance desired, had denounced him, and, after the sentence of the poor man, who was more sinned against than sinning, had pleaded his suit only too successfully with the wife.

"Does he suspect any one?" gasped Gridston, realizing the danger that was threatening him.

"No!"

Gridston once more breathed freely.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"In the buffet, drinking at my expense, curse the luck!"

"No, Traacher, bless it," replied Gridston, laughing aloud in his relief.

He stood silent for a moment, ruminating, and

then, as a sudden and most brilliant idea struck him, a way in which this most unexpected appearance of Burnsides could be worked to his own advantage, he clutched Treacher by the arm.

“This is the best thing that has happened to me for many a long day. Come, take me to him!”

* * * * *

“My dear boy, get me my cloak, and then—and then you had better say good-night, and run away.”

The speaker was Beatrice Moreland, and her companion was Harry Chichester.

They had but a moment before finished a waltz, and had retired into a tiny glass-roofed conservatory just off of the ball-room.

The last year had not improved Harry Chichester either in appearance or in character.

He had accepted his brother's sacrifice, but not without many a qualm of conscience, and, whenever he allowed himself to think of it, with the utmost self-contempt.

He had kept his word, and proposed to Aileen, only to be rejected gently but firmly.

This, in itself, was a relief to him.

Then had come the discovery, or rather suspicion which amounted to a certainty that he was the forger, and not Tom.

After a stormy interview with his father, Harry had flung himself out of the paternal mansion, but

while he refused to return, he was not too proud to accept the allowance which his doting father, after his first anger, offered him through Gillie Fletcher.

Since then, he had lived a life of dissipation, his infatuation for Cynthia Dell increasing rather than diminishing. The Panther was a past mistress in the art of holding her lovers, and in this case her own heart, if she had one, was not a little interested.

Harry to-night was in anything but a good temper.

Cynthia had promised to meet him at the Aspasia, but, as yet, she had not put in an appearance.

To while away the time he had endeavored to amuse himself in the company of Beatrice Moreland, a rather dangerous experiment if he had but known it.

For Beatrice's somewhat fickle fancy had been captivated by his handsome face and youthful charm, and she had determined to dispute with the Panther the right to his possession.

"Run away!" repeated Harry, in reply to Beatrice's suggestion. "Why should I?"

Beatrice's lips wreathed themselves in a smile, a smile which expressed far more than she would have either cared or dared to put into words.

"Are you not afraid?" she asked.

"Afraid!" repeated Harry, looking at her in surprise. "What should I be afraid of?"

"Oh," replied Beatrice, still smiling, but with an inward tremor. To do her justice, she was only afraid

of offending Harry, and so hurting herself. For the rest she cared little. "Oh, of her! Of your love, your wild beast, your Panther, of course?"

Harry was far from being pleased with this speech. He cared nothing for Beatrice Moreland, and he did care a great deal for the woman whom he felt she was sneering at. But, before he could frame a reply, a clear, rich voice startled them both.

"Ah, Beatrice, speaking of me!"

Cynthia Dell had entered the little conservatory unperceived, and was standing not ten feet from them.

Beatrice started, and then turned to confront the woman she knew to be her rival and her enemy.

"Yes," she said, boldly, with a sneer she took little pains to conceal; "of your conquests, of your good luck, of—of your age."

The Panther's black eyes flashed, but there was a smile upon her lips, and she fanned herself with studied nonchalance, as she replied, without a tremor in her voice:

"I understand perfectly, and appreciate the situation. Success nowadays, my dear Beatrice, no matter what the line of business may be, is a crime, and it is the duty of the unsuccessful to punish it. I bow my head humbly to my unfair executioner."

And she swept a magnificent but mocking courtesy to the angry Beatrice.

Harry Chichester looked as he felt, decidedly uncomfortable. What can a man do when two women are on the verge of quarreling?

In spite of the fact that Cynthia had now cast aside pretty effectually the cloak of respectability under which she had formerly masqueraded, Harry was as madly in love with her as ever, and was ready to abandon everything to his passion.

If Cynthia was outwardly cool, Beatrice was not.

With her face flushing hotly through its rouge, she was about to give vent to some stinging reply when, suddenly, Cynthia, who was facing the little door beside the alcove, to which the others had their backs, turned deadly pale and staggered back a little with a faint cry of horror.

Her face was set in firm, rigid lines, and a sick sensation of fear passed through her, as she recognized, standing in the door-way, beside Gridston, the haggard features of the man she had hoped never to see again—her wronged husband, Fretly Burnsides.

“What’s the matter?” asked Harry, in alarm, leaping forward to her side.

Cynthia’s hand sought her throat, as if to remove a clutch which seemed to be strangling her.

“Nothing,” she said, with an effort, speaking in a hoarse, unnatural voice. “Leave me; see if the carriage is here. Quickly! Go at once! go at once!”

“But, Cynthia,” protested Harry.

The Panther wrested her eyes from the figure which had so alarmed her, and turned them wildly upon Harry.

“Do what I tell you!” she exclaimed, with suppressed passion. “Don’t stand staring at me! Do what I ask you! Go!”

Harry stood bewildered for a moment, and then, with a puzzled expression, obeyed. As he left the room, Gridston pointed after him, at the same time whispering a word or two in Burnsides’ ear.

Beatrice gave Cynthia one long, curious look, and then, with a shrug of her white shoulders, returned to the ball-room.

No sooner was Cynthia alone than the two men entered the room.

Gridston went out on the veranda, where he stood, eagerly watching the scene, while Burnsides came slowly down to his wife’s side.

The ex-convict was a man of perhaps forty, but prematurely aged. His face was haggard, and his eyes wild and staring.

Cynthia, without moving, awaited his approach. She had now recovered from her first fright, and, with her usual courage, was prepared to await the development of events.

Burnsides reached her side, and paused with his eyes upon her face.

"You know me, I see," he said, at last, in a hollow voice.

"Yes, I know you," replied Cynthia, slowly; "what do you want?"

"You!" reaching out his hand as if to draw her toward him.

But, with a shudder, Cynthia shrank from him.

"Don't touch me!"

"You forget I'm your husband!" returned Burnsides.

His voice was low, but there was a latent ferocity in it.

"My husband!" ejaculated the Panther, between her set teeth. "Ugh! I hate you! Why didn't you die in prison, as I hoped, I prayed, you would?"

"Do you think such prayers as yours are ever answered? But, I'll tell you why I didn't die, why for five years I fought for life in the jail you sent me to. It was because, Heaven forgive me! I love you still!"

"You love me!" with a movement, part amazement, part disgust.

"Yes!" cried Burnsides, his excitement obtaining the mastery over him, and his voice rising above the music which rolled in from the ball-room. "You are mine! And I want you again! I will have you! Do you hear? To be with me always, always! I'm mad, they say! Well, you shall share my madness!"

"But you don't know——"

"I know everything. The life you're leading. The man you've led it with, the man who plotted with you to send me to prison, the man I saw with you just now! *The man I am going to kill!*"

In spite of herself, Cynthia uttered a shriek of horror, a shriek which caused the musicians to drop their instruments and the dancers to come hurrying in alarm to the door of the drawing-room.

"No! no!" she screamed, frantically. "You are wrong! Listen to me! You must! You are wrong! wrong!"

But Burnsides, with a terrible light in his blood-shot eyes, caught her by the wrist and twisted her about.

"I'm right!" he cried, pointing to the door-way, where stood Harry Chichester, who had just pushed his way through the crowd, "and there he stands!"

White with rage at the sight of Cynthia in this stranger's grasp, Harry strode forward with clinched fist.

"Let go that lady!" he cried. "Let her go, I say! Cynthia, what does the brute want?"

Burnsides dropped his wife's arm, and turned upon the young man with a snarl like a wild beast.

"The brute wants his wife!" he yelled.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PANTHER AT BAY.

The house occupied by Mrs. Dell in Highgate was a villa of moderate dimensions, but very handsome in all its appointments, both inside and out. It stood in grounds of its own, which were surrounded by a high wall, with a gate of iron-work, heavily gilded.

The place really belonged to Gridston, purchased with a part of his profits derived from the Aspasia Club, and he had offered it to Cynthia rent free, with the provision that he should reserve a small suite of rooms for his own occupancy.

The Panther had accepted. She rarely refused gifts from her admirers, but she stipulated that no one should know of the transaction save the owner and herself.

To this Gridston had readily assented. Cynthia Dell had a way of holding the men who had once been her lovers, and Gridston was no exception to the rule.

It was almost two o'clock in the morning, and in the perfumed air of the richly furnished drawing-room, a pretty French maid, lolling back in one of

the chairs was yawning desperately, while a man in livery was standing in front of an open buffet, and helping himself to some of the liquor contained therein.

"A very excellent drop of brandy, this, Rose," he said, smacking his lips.

"You had better be careful with it, Amos," warned the maid, "or Captain Gridston will notice your very frequent samplings."

"Not a bit of it," replied Amos, confidently, with a very expressive wink. "All the liquor that's drank in this house is put down to the name of Mr. Henry Chichester."

"Yes," acknowledged Rose, with a sigh. "Poor young fellow! His dream is nearly over."

"I don't see why he should be pitied," replied Amos. "He's had his fling, and of course he's had to pay for it."

The ormolu clock on the mantle-piece struck twice.

"Two o'clock," said Rose, wearily. "They won't be home for an hour yet at least. Oh! this life is killing me!"

Amos closed the buffet, and came over toward her, with a look of longing upon his face.

"Then why not quit it?" he asked, with a certain significance. "We've done very well here, one way

or another. I'm sure we can afford to marry and be respectable. What do you say?"

Now Rose was not a bad girl in her way. Through answering an advertisement, she had come into the employ of one of the gorgeously plumaged, but soiled doves that inhabit such villas as she was now in, and, after that, she had found it impossible to obtain employment in more respectable families.

"I'll think it over, Amos," she said, not liking to agree at once, although her mind was fully made up.

Amos was about to push the point, when a loud ringing at the bell brought him back to the duties for which he was paid.

"That's them!" he exclaimed, emphatically, though ungrammatically. "I'll go and open the door."

Rose started from her chair, and, rubbing her eyes, prepared to receive her mistress. It was unusual for them to be home as early as this. Why, she would be in bed before daylight for the first time since she had been there.

In a few minutes her mistress, accompanied by Captain Gridston, entered the room.

Cynthia, looking very pale and weary, flung off her gold-embroidered opera-cloak and sank down upon a divan.

"Will madame change her dress?" asked Rose.

"No," replied Cynthia, passing her hand over her

forehead, as if to drive away unpleasant thoughts. "No, Rose, I shall go to bed early for once. Good-night, Rose."

"Good-night, madame," replied Rose, only too glad to escape.

Cynthia was thankful to reach home at last, and well she might be.

The scene which she had been compelled to undergo at the Aspasia Club had been a most trying one, to say the least.

As Burnsides made the startling declaration he did, Harry Chichester started forward to fell him to the floor, but, before he could accomplish his purpose his arm was seized by those behind him.

At the same time, Sheridan, the American, with one or two others, started forward and caught Burnsides.

Harry, very much against his will, was hurried away.

In the midst of the commotion, Gridston came down from the balcony to Cynthia's side.

"Come away! Come away at once!" he whispered. "Now is your chance."

"But how about Harry?"

"He'll follow."

"And the other one?"

"He must take his chance, but you must give him the slip."

As he spoke, he drew her away, through the little door which led to the private exit.

Leaving her standing in the entry, he rushed back for her wrap, for the night was chilly, and then hailed a cab, which fortunately, or rather perhaps unfortunately for him, as it turned out, was standing in front of the door, and ordered the driver to go to Highgate Hill as if the devil was behind him.

The cabman whipped up his horse, after another man, who had been hiding in the shadow, had jumped up beside him, and, as he drove away, he thought to himself, with a smile of triumph:

“As if the devil was behind me! No! The devil is in front of me, and I’m driving him home!”

In order not to keep the reader in useless suspense, perhaps it is just as well to say here that the cabman was Tom Chichester, who, believing that the people he was waiting for would, sooner or later, emerge from that private door, had made a bargain with Jim Palfrey. It was easy enough for him to fling the gigantic cabman’s overcoat over his own, and thus disguised to await the passengers who finally appeared, as he had felt confident they would.

His one object was to discover the Panther’s address, knowing that there he would sooner or later find his brother.

When they were safely in the drawing-room of the villa, Gridston looked at Cynthia, as she lay back ex-

hausted, with a half-pitying expression, and then he turned to the buffet to pour himself out some brandy.

Before he could raise the glass to his lips, however, a knock came at the door, followed by the entrance of his valet, Amos, who announced that the cabman who had driven them there insisted upon seeing Mrs. Dell.

“What does he want?” demanded Gridston, in irritated surprise.

“He wouldn’t give a message, sir,” replied Amos.

“Then she won’t see him. Tell him to leave at once.”

But before the valet could go to deliver this answer, he was pushed aside, and a man with a cabman’s coat turned up about his ears and a soft hat slouched over his face, pushed his way into the room, and thrusting the astonished valet out of the door, closed it behind him.

“What the deuce do you mean by this?” vociferated Gridston.

In reply, the man flung off the disguising hat and coat.

“Chichester!” exclaimed Gridston, starting back, while Cynthia rose to her feet at the unexpected apparition.

“Yes,” replied Tom, facing them both with determined eyes and compressed lips. “You refused me

this lady's address. I told you I'd find you out. Well, I've kept my word."

"How the devil did you——" began Gridston.

"Discover it?" interrupted Tom, with an ironical smile. "Why, from the devil himself."

"What?"

"Oh, yes, you gave it to me, when I drove you home in the cab."

"You drove the cab!" repeated Gridston, too amazed to know exactly what course to take.

"Certainly," replied Tom, calmly, throwing a handful of change upon the table, "and there's the fare you paid me."

There was a silence for a moment. The Panther leaned back in her chair, eying this bold intruder from under her half-closed lids, while Gridston stood irresolute, scarcely knowing how best to deal with him.

"What do you want?" said the latter, at last.

"A few words with this lady," replied Tom, coming boldly forward.

At this, Cynthia raised her head, gave Tom a scrutinizing glance, and then motioned Gridston to retire.

Hesitatingly and sulkily, the captain moved away to a corner of the room, where he was out of ear-shot, but still where he could see all that was going on.

"What do you require of me?" asked Cynthia,

when she was comparatively alone with Tom. At the same time she fixed her eyes upon him defiantly.

"Where is Harry?" asked Tom, abruptly.

Cynthia raised her eyebrows.

"I thought so," she said, with a peculiar smile. "The same as before. Two years ago, you said you would take him from me, but you failed, you see."

"This time I hope to succeed," retorted Tom, firmly.

Cynthia leaned forward.

"You mean to separate us?"

"Yes, if possible."

"You are wise to say if. For," with a confidence which was in no way assumed, "it will never happen. We love each other."

Tom's lip curled incredulously.

"You love!"

"Yes, I love!" she declared, feeling in her heart that she was not far from speaking the truth. "You think," she went on, her nostrils dilating scornfully, "you think, I suppose, that a woman of my sort is incapable of such a thing. You are wrong! I would give half of the life that is left to me to pass the rest away from all this wickedness."

Her words and manner impressed Tom in spite of himself, and he wondered if by any possibility she could be speaking the truth.

As he thought this, it was in a much softer, in fact, almost in a sympathetic tone, that he said:

"If what you say is true, there is a good spot still left in your heart."

Cynthia sighed, and then laughed.

"You are kind," she said, with an attempt at irony, but despite herself, her voice faltered a little.

Tom came forward, closer to her.

"Let me appeal to that goodness," he said, with the utmost earnestness. "You say you love Harry. Then make a sacrifice for his sake, and save him from a terrible sin."

"A sin!"

"The sin of killing his father! For he is doing so by his desertion and reckless conduct."

"Bah!" retorted the Panther, her softened mood passing. "His relations are nothing to me."

"Then, let me plead for his own sake," besought Tom, hoping even against hope, that he might touch the vulnerable part in her armor. "His career, as you know, is almost ruined. His one chance is to leave this country and start afresh. Will you give him this chance?"

The Panther raised her great dark eyes, and looked at him keenly. Perhaps, just for that one moment, she was nearer forgetful of self, nearer doing a really generous act than she had ever been in her life.

"Suppose, even if I promised," she said, reflec-

tively, "what then? He might insist on loving me still. Men do sometimes!"

This last with an intonation partly regretful, partly proud.

"Give me the opportunity to meet my brother. That is all I ask."

It was absurd for Tom to feel so hopeful, for where is the man, even though he be a brother, that can hope to compete with a woman, however unworthy she may be?

Pure motives go for nothing where passion comes in question.

The Panther paused for a moment. Perhaps she was wavering, perhaps she was wondering how far she could fool this man who was attempting to save his brother from what he believed to be ruination.

"Yes," she said, at last, as if coming to a resolution, "yes, you shall meet him! You shall speak to him here before me. I will say nothing more. I will even urge him to leave me, to love me no more. If he consents," and she could not repress a proud smile as, even while she was more or less sincere, the thought came to her that he would not consent, "well, it shall be good-by forever. But, if he refuses, as frankly I pray he will, I suppose we shall go to the bad, faster than before."

Tom was anything but hard-hearted, and, in spite of all that was at stake, he could not help being

just a little touched. He sternly crushed back the feeling, however, and said, calmly:

"When can I see him, and where?"

"Here, of course. To-morrow evening."

"I can rely on this?"

"How suspicious you are! Can't you trust me?"

"I must," responded Tom, sighing. "I cannot help myself. To-morrow evening, then, I shall be here to meet Harry. If I don't," once more becoming suspicious and therefore threatening, "I shall be compelled to take other steps."

He moved away toward the door, but, to his surprise, his departure was barred by Captain Gridston, who had not lost sight of him throughout the interview, and who thought the time had now come to interfere.

"And what are the other steps, pray?" he asked, with an ugly scowl.

"That is my business," replied Tom, curtly.

"And mine! What you say implies a threat toward this lady. I'll not allow it!"

Tom's face grew dark. This was a different matter entirely. This was no longer man against woman, but man against man; and he certainly had no desire to show either courtesy or compassion to Captain Gridston.

"I can take care of myself," he said, drawing himself up and looking the other full in the face.

"I'll not permit you to come here again!" exclaimed Gridston, losing his temper.

Tom was angry, too, but he kept himself well under control.

"Mr. Gridston," with an accent upon the Mr., "before I came into this house, I made up my mind I would not exchange words with you, if possible. I beg of you to let me go without doing so. Believe me, it will be better for you."

"Do you think I'm a coward?" snapped Gridston.

"I know you're a rogue," replied Tom, very quietly, "and they generally go together."

Gridston turned scarlet with rage, and made a rush at the man who had thus insulted him. But, like a flash, Tom, who had been expecting something of the sort, caught him by the coat, and, thrusting him away, held him at arm's length.

"Keep still, or I'll thrash you now!" he cried.

Just behind them, fixed against the wall, was a round wooden shield, decorated with arms of various kinds. Gridston, who was wild with rage, reached out his hand and wrenched away a pistol.

"Take care!" he shouted, presenting the weapon. "Let me go!"

Tom involuntarily released him. Then, remembering that he had in his pocket the pistol he had taken from his father, he produced it.

"I'm armed, too!" he said, quietly.

But before either could make another movement, the Panther had rushed between them.

"Are you both mad?" she cried. Then she turned toward Gridston and took the pistol from him, at the same time whispering: "Fool, this isn't loaded!"

Tom, lowering his own weapon, stepped back.

"Mr. Chichester, our interview, I think, is finished," said Cynthia, coldly. "Rest assured, I will keep my promise. Good-night."

"Good-night."

Tom turned away to pick up the cabman's coat he had borrowed from Palfrey, and, as he did so, he laid his pistol down upon the table for a moment.

The Panther saw her opportunity. Darting noiselessly forward, she deftly exchanged the weapon for the useless one Gridston had snatched from the shield.

It was so rapidly done that Tom noticed nothing. He returned to the table, and, picking up the pistol, dropped it into his pocket.

"I'll make you repent this, Chichester!" hissed Gridston, who was still boiling with anger.

"I'll take my chances," replied Tom, carelessly.

He walked over to the door, and then, suddenly remembering something Fletcher had told him while they were on their way to the Aspasia Club, he paused upon the threshold.

"One word before I leave, Mr. Gridston," he said, turning. "It has come to my ears that for some time

you have been paying unwelcome attentions to a young lady whose name I don't think it necessary to mention. I must ask you to discontinue these attentions at once and forever."

"Are you speaking at the lady's request?" asked Gridston, sneeringly.

"Yes."

"I don't believe you. Miss Millar is not likely to choose a criminal for her champion."

Tom bit his lip, with difficulty restraining his anger.

After a moment, he said, speaking very distinctly and firmly:

"The lady you mention is going to be my wife! Now, do you understand? Good-night!"

And, wheeling about, he left the room.

Gridston started forward to follow him, but Cynthia caught him by the arm and detained him.

"You are ridiculous. Leave him to me. I shall repay with interest. Be sure of that!"

Gridston hesitated a moment, and then yielded.

"There's one good thing about it," he said, sulkily. "If you keep your word, I shall see the back of Harry at last."

"No!" cried Cynthia, involuntarily.

"Oh, come, Cynthia, be sensible for once!" said Gridston, half impatiently, half persuasively. "What's the use of keeping the young fool dangling at your

feet any longer? He hasn't a cent in the world. Let him drift as others have done, as others do, to ruin."

There was no mincing of matters between this precious pair, and Cynthia's answer was equally as frank.

"I must think it over. I love him. The question is this: Is my love strong enough to spare, to save him?"

At that moment the bell of the outer door rang with a quick, sudden peal.

"That's Harry, I expect," said Gridston.

"I think so. Leave me."

"You'll finish with him to-night?"

"Perhaps," was the evasive answer.

"Take my advice and do. I'll see you again, when he's gone. Be firm."

Picking up his hat and coat, Gridston went out at one door as Amos entered at the other.

"A gentleman wishes to see you, ma'am," said the servant.

"Who is he?" asked Cynthia, in some surprise.

"A stranger, ma'am."

"I can see no one at this hour. Tell him to call to-morrow."

"Yes, ma'am."

Left alone, Cynthia sank down in an arm-chair be-

fore the fire, and, shading her face with her hand, gave herself up to reflection.

Yes, it was best that she and Harry should part. In fact, it must be done. It was not that she had the slightest fear of anything Tom Chichester might do, but on account of the other—her husband. She knew that he was desperate, and that Harry was in real danger at his hands. Oh, why did the prison give him up? Why didn't he die, or stay there forever?"

A noise at the window startled her, and she turned in affright.

A man had climbed up the balcony, and was standing just outside the window.

Before Cynthia could call for aid, he had sprung forward and was by her side. With a spasm of fear, she recognized the white face and frenzied eyes of her legal lord and master.

"You!" she gasped.

"Yes," returned Burnsides, in a hollow voice, his wild gaze fixed gloatingly upon her beautiful face. "After you left, they threw me into the streets like a dog, and like a dog, I followed you."

Cynthia had risen to her feet, and was standing with one hand grasping the back of the chair. Her mind was in a tumult, and what to do she scarcely knew. But at all costs, he must be got rid of. Harry might be there at any moment.

"I left a message for you," she said.

"Yes, before throwing me out, one of the flunkeys gave it to me, telling me to come here to-morrow."

"Why are you here now, then?"

"Because with me it has been to-morrow for five long years," was the passionate answer. "I could not rest away from you."

He came a step closer to her, in his eyes a glitter almost like insanity.

"But you can't stay here," faltered Cynthia, unable to control the terrible fear she felt creeping over her.

"Why not?" fiercely. "Ah! Don't answer! I know why not. Your lover is in the house."

"No! no!" cried Cynthia, quickly. "I swear it!"

"But he's coming here! You expect him! Tell me the truth!"

With a loud cry, she made a rush for the door, but, anticipating some such movement, Burnsides was too quick for her. He leaped in front and locked the door.

"Help!" screamed Cynthia.

Burnsides, with an oath, caught her and dragged her back into the middle of the room.

"Stop that!" he commanded, threateningly. "I understand. You want to bring the police. But I'll not go back to prison! I'll die first! And so shall you, unless, unless——"

"What!" she panted, struggling to free herself.

"Tell me quickly. You are hurting me! Let me go!"

But the man, who was not much better than insane, driven so by his wrongs, only tightened his hold.

"I'll spare you and him on one condition," he said, between his teeth, bringing his face close to hers.

"What is it?"

"Come back to me! Be my wife again!"

"Never!"

This answer robbed him of what little brains he had left. All went from him save one thought—revenge.

He caught the woman by the throat in a fierce grasp, but not before she had uttered another piercing shriek.

She struggled wildly, but the Panther's life would probably have ended then and there had not Gridston heard her cry for help and come to her rescue.

Finding the door locked, he put his shoulder to it and burst it open.

Then, as he saw what was taking place, he snatched up a chair, raised it high in the air, and brought it down with full force upon the head of Cynthia's assailant.

The deadly clutch of the fingers relaxed, and, with

a groan, Burnsides fell forward, senseless, upon his face.

White and exhausted, the Panther reeled back against the table.

"Who is it?" asked Gridston, in a whisper.

Unable to speak, Cynthia motioned to him to look for himself.

Gridston advanced to the side of the unconscious body, knelt down, and turned it over.

"Burnsides!"

Cynthia, still gasping, leaned forward, with a look of savage longing upon her pale face.

"Is—is he dead?" she asked, with difficulty.

"I think not," replied Gridston. "Wait!"

And once again he leaned over the body.

"Well?"

"Not dead! He still breathes!"

The Panther struck her hands together in bitter disappointment.

"What shall we do?"

"We've nothing to fear," replied Gridston, rising.

"He came like a thief. Better send for the police at once."

As he spoke, he moved away to touch the electric bell.

But Cynthia sprang forward and caught his extended hand.

"No!" she murmured, bending upon him a look charged with significance. "He is not dead—*yet!*"

Gridston returned her look, and, hardened though he was, he shuddered at what he read in those savage, gleaming eyes.

"My God! I understand."

The Panther smiled, a horrible smile.

"You understand?"

"Yes," faltered Gridston, trembling in spite of himself, "and if—and if——"

"If you——" She did not finish her sentence, but pointed toward the prostrate form of Burnsides with a gesture that was far more expressive than any words. "Why, then, I'll give up Harry Chichester, and——"

She held out her hand to Gridston, and he caught it with a cry.

"You swear it?"

"I swear it!"

"I'll do it!"

He dropped her hand, wiped the perspiration from his brow, gave a glance at Burnsides' body, and then turned to the shield upon which the various weapons were arranged.

But, before he could detach one of them, through the window which Burnsides had left open came faintly, yet distinctly, the words:

"All right, sir, I understand. Good-night."

And then the response, in a voice which both of them recognized as that of Tom Chichester:

“Good-night, constable!”

The Panther raised her hand in warning.

“Hush!”

Gridston, abandoning his search for a weapon, crept over to the window, and from behind the shelter of the curtains peered out upon the moon-lit grounds.

“The patrol,” he whispered, “and Chichester are watching in the gardens.”

Cynthia thought for a moment, and then a scheme of action occurring to her, said:

“Bring him to my room!”

“Your room!” repeated Gridston.

“Yes,” defiantly. “Why not? I am his wife.”

She advanced close to him, and added, grimly:

“When shall I be his *widow*?”

CHAPTER IX.

A SHOT IN THE DARK.

When Tom Chichester first left the Panther's presence, he was inclined to think that she was sincere, and that, through her very evident love for his brother, perhaps her better nature was aroused, and she would really try to save him.

But gradually this impression faded, and he became more and more anxious.

Finally he decided to return, and to see Harry if he could. He felt pretty certain, after what had occurred, that his brother would be there that night, and he thought possibly his appeal might tell. After all, blood was blood; but there, Tom, judging from his own feelings, made a mistake. He forgot the enormous influence that can be wielded by a woman, and especially a woman of the Panther's class. What is a brother in comparison with such a fascination, even though the victim while he yields to it, may be quite aware of how meretricious it is?

So Tom came back to wait. Perhaps he was wrong, as he thought to himself, but he could not trust that woman.

He entered the grounds of the villa, leaving Jim Palfrey outside to warn him of anybody's approach.

As he waited there the sergeant of police passed up the street, and Tom called to him, feeling instinctively that he might need some assistance.

The conversation that ensued was what was heard by the Panther and Gridston in the drawing-room above, and prevented, at least temporarily, the crime they were contemplating.

Tom had not long to wait after that before Palfrey came hurrying through the ornate gates, with the announcement that a cab was coming.

"Perhaps it's the gent you're waiting for, sir."

And so it proved. In another instant the cab stopped before the gate, and a voice, which Tom, with a thrill at his heart, recognized at once, was heard saying:

"It's all right. You can keep the change."

"It's Harry," thought Tom. "Oh, Heaven help me with him!"

As he thought this he came forward to meet the brother whom he loved so well, but yet, through that very love, he was a little afraid of.

"Who the devil are you?" exclaimed Harry, not recognizing him at first.

"Harry, old man, how are you?" exclaimed Tom, tremulously, extending his hand.

Then Harry recognized him as the moonlight fell

full upon his face, but, with the obstinacy which was his weakness, he refused to give any outward exhibition of his real emotion.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, sullenly, rigidly repressing all that he actually felt at meeting his brother after so long an interval of time.

Tom was hurt at the cold reception with which he was greeted, but still he answered, affectionately:

"Harry, old chap, I've come from our father."

"Our father!" repeated Harry, startled.

"Yes, our father. Harry, he has forgiven."

"Forgiven!" repeated the young man, who was really more sinned against than sinning.

"It will never be mentioned again," said Tom, his heart going out to the younger son of his mother.

"Harry, the old man's heart is still bleeding from the wound you opened, and only you can stop it. Come home to him and save his life."

As he made this impassioned appeal, unseen either by him or his brother, there appeared on the balcony, just over their heads, the woman who had caused all the trouble, accompanied by the man who had been her first tempter to wrong-doing.

The unconscious form of Burnsides had been safely deposited in the Panther's chamber, with the key turned upon him, and then, attracted by the sound of voices, the two had cautiously emerged upon the balcony.

"I'm sorry, very sorry," said Harry, moved in spite of himself, and yet determined not to yield. "So sorry for the governor, but I can't come home."

"You can't come home!" exclaimed Tom, losing his patience.

It meant so much to him, and he was so confident that he saw infinitely clearer than his brother did, and yet he knew that nothing that he could say would open Harry's eyes. Nevertheless he must make the effort.

"Where in Heaven's name is your manhood?" he continued, appealingly. "You must come home. You shall! For once in your life let your better nature rule you. It's not yourself that answers me. It's not your father's son, your mother's child who speaks." Tom's voice grew low and tremulous, and then, with sudden transition, as he remembered who had caused all this trouble, it rang out in almost denunciation: "No, it is this woman who governs you, this woman who is killing you and turning you into a parricide!"

"What?" cried Harry, angrily.

"I repeat it!" said Tom, doggedly, feeling all the time that he was making a mistake, and yet not knowing how to rectify it without being false to himself.

By the way, it is generally the tactful, not the truthful, who conquer in this world.

“Yes,” continued Tom, “it is your neglect, your wickedness—for that’s the true word for it—which means our father’s death. The whole terrible cause of it all is this woman you love, you cling to, and believe in!”

“And always shall!” announced Harry, obstinately.

As he spoke these words, the two figures on the balcony above came close to the edge and leaned forward breathlessly. These two figures, if they had been discovered at that moment by the brothers, might have made a great change in what followed.

As it was, neither saw Cynthia and Gridston.

When Harry made this last statement, Tom, revolted at what he considered almost criminal obstinacy, lost his temper.

“Take care, Harry, take care!” he exclaimed, in a voice that was distinctly audible to those upon the balcony above. “I once took your sin upon my shoulders, and would again if it would avail you anything, but if you hesitate now, I shall not. You crave for the heart of a woman. I fight for the life of a man—our father’s life. Throw them in the balance for a moment; in one scale the happiness of him to whom we both owe our existence, in the other a worthless passion that will carry you to ruin. Now which is it to be? Your father, or your mistress?”

At this, which was certainly plain speaking, the Panther's breast was filled with a mad, unreasoning rage. With a sudden wild impulse she thrust the pistol she had taken from Tom, and which she had hidden in the bosom of her dress, into Gridston's hand.

"If you have a spark of courage," she said, in a furious whisper, "rid us of that man."

Gridston mechanically took the weapon.

"I'm waiting," came Tom's voice from below, after a pause. "Will you come home?"

"No! no! no!" retorted his brother, defiantly, all his obstinacy, which was his dominating fault, rising in its full strength. "This lady you malign I'd make my wife to-morrow if she'd marry me. She's as good and better than many others. Even that Aileen, who ——"

But he was destined never to finish the sentence. Stung beyond all endurance, Tom advanced upon him threateningly.

"Recall those words," he thundered, "or——"

Without warning, Harry raised the walking-stick he carried and struck at his brother.

At the same moment Gridston leveled the pistol and fired. Then, without waiting to see the result of his shot, he flung the weapon over the balcony, and, accompanied by Cynthia, disappeared within the house.

Harry staggered, threw up his arms, and fell prostrate.

All his anger vanishing as if by magic, Tom uttered a cry of horror and threw himself down upon his knees by his brother's side.

"Harry! what is it?" he cried, in anguish. "You're hurt."

As he spoke he attempted to raise the young man, and saw in the moonlight that he was white as death and the blood was oozing from a wound in his side.

"Help! help!" he shrieked.

In response to his call Jim Palfrey, who had remained outside with the cab, came rushing through the gate.

"I heard a shot, sir! What's the matter?"

"Something terrible," responded Tom, raising a face convulsed with agony. "Arouse the house, Jim! My brother is wounded."

"Wounded!"

"Yes, shot! Drive for the doctor, and bring the police!"

Shocked as he was, Palfrey fortunately did not lose his presence of mind.

He ran to the door and pulled the bell and then flew away to summon the physician, remembering, fortunately, that there was one at the corner of the street.

Tom raised Harry in his arms.

“My poor brother!” he sobbed, the tears rolling down his cheeks.

The door of the house opened, and Mrs. Dell and Gridston came hurriedly down the steps into the court-yard.

Tom’s back was toward them, however, and he was too absorbed in his concern for his brother to notice their approach.

The Panther mistook the kneeling figure for her lover.

“Harry,” she muttered, hoarsely, laying her hand upon his shoulder, as she supposed, “come away quickly into the house, before the police—— You may be suspected! Come!”

Tom turned his head and looked up into her face. As she recognized him she staggered and uttered a horrible shriek.

“You! Then——”

She gave one glance at the body Tom was supporting.

“Oh, my God!” she screamed, as the truth was forced in upon her; and she fell upon her knees by Harry’s side.

“What’s the matter?” asked Gridston, trying to speak naturally. “Has your brother been hurt?”

Before Tom could answer two policemen, alarmed by the shot, and also hurried on by Palfrey, who had met them, came running through the gate.

"What's wrong, gentlemen?" asked the foremost, taking in the scene at a glance. "Quick, explain!"

"This house is mine," said Gridston, feeling that boldness was the card to play now. "I heard a shot and cries for help. I came out and found that gentleman lying upon the ground and this one," pointing to Tom, "standing over him."

"What have you to say to this?" asked the policeman, turning to Tom, who rose slowly to his feet.

"I don't understand," he replied, slowly, trying to collect his bewildered senses. "I came here to-night on business with Captain Gridston. As I was leaving, I—I met my brother. I tried to prevent him entering the house. He attempted to strike me. We struggled, and then I heard a shot."

The policeman looked incredulous. It was not a very probable story, to say the least. Suddenly his eye fell upon something lying in the walk, something that glittered in the moonlight.

He stooped and picked up the pistol Gridston had thrown there.

"The shot was fired by this, I suppose?" he said.

Tom started in amazement.

For a moment there was silence, broken only by the moans of Cynthia, who was still bending over Harry.

Then Gridston spoke.

"Why," he said, with an admirable simulation of

astonishment, "that is the pistol you threatened me with in the house just now."

Tom's hand sought his pocket.

"No!" he cried, producing the one which was there, the one the Panther had substituted for his. "Here is mine."

"You might have had two pistols," said the policeman, whose mind was already pretty well made up. "Anyhow, it's very suspicious."

"It's more than that, I'm afraid," declared Gridston. "They were never friendly, as every one knows. They met, there must have been a quarrel, and—and a murder!"

"You liar!" cried Tom, in a choking voice, making a movement toward the man who thus dared to accuse him.

But, springing forward, the policeman stepped between.

Before any one could speak again there was a thrilling cry from Cynthia.

"Ah! he is not dead! See! see! he is opening his eyes!"

Forgetful of all else now save his brother, Tom turned and knelt again beside him.

Harry's fast glazing eyes sought his face.

"Harry, dear Harry, look at me! You know me, do you not?"

There was a faint murmur of assent.

“Harry, you’ve been shot, and I’m accused of it. We have disagreed at times, but we have always loved each other. By that love and for all our sakes, I beg and implore you to speak the truth. Am I guilty?”

The dying man, with a last effort, raised his head.

“No!” he cried, in a voice distinctly audible to all present.

Then, with a gurgling, choking sound in his throat, he fell back.

When Palfrey, a moment after, arrived with the physician it was too late.

Harry Chichester’s soul had passed to its Maker.

CHAPTER X.

AILEEN FALLS INTO THE TRAP.

“Hist, Becky!”

Becky Vetch started and paused in her occupation of dusting the front parlor.

Then, as she saw who it was that was standing in the open door-way which led into the hall, she shrugged her shoulders and exclaimed, with a saucy toss of her head:

“Oh, is it you, Jim Palfrey?”

Those were anything but easy days for Becky. She had to work hard, early and late, but still she managed to keep bright and merry, and now that the sick gentleman was convalescing, her sweet voice was constantly uplifted in the snatches of the old ballads she loved so well.

It was nearly two months now since the news had been brought to his family waiting in that very house of the shocking death of young Harry Chichester.

Upon hearing the terrible tidings old Mr. Chichester had fallen unconscious, and for many days hovered between life and death. The doctor had for-

bidden his removal, and there was nothing to be done save to make him as comfortable as possible where he was. Mrs. Vetch and her niece, good, kind-hearted creatures that they were, came nobly to the rescue. The back parlor was given up to the invalid as a bedroom, and a folding bed was put up in the front parlor for Aileen and Gracie, so that they might be near him. Tom, too, remained in his old room and was assiduous in his attentions to his father.

In the midst of their grief and anxiety it was a trying time for them all. Mr. Chichester, however, was finally pronounced out of danger. He had been sitting up now for several days, and it had been decided to return home to the house in Raymond street very shortly.

"How is the old gentleman to-day?" asked Jim, tiptoeing into the room and casting a cautious glance at the closed folding-doors between the parlors.

"Much better," replied Becky, in a subdued voice. "Miss Aileen and Miss Gracie are with him."

Suddenly Jim started, and creeping over to the window, peered out from behind the curtains, to Becky's open-mouthed astonishment.

But before she could speak a word, he turned, his red face redder than ever, and said, in an excited whisper:

"Yes, I'm sure I'm right. I knew I was, Becky. This place is being watched."

"You don't say so!" returned Becky, in dismay.

"Yes, I do. And it's been going on ever since the inquest."

"But why, Jim?"

Palfrey hesitated a moment, and then answered, with an ominous shake of the head:

"Well, Becky, you know the jury's verdict was willful murder against an unknown party."

"Yes."

"I'm afraid some of 'em think they knows who the unknown party is and where he lives."

"You don't mean to say they suspect some one in this house?" cried Becky, thoroughly alarmed.

"I'm afraid so, Becky."

"Who can it be?" Then, as she realized what Jim meant, she thrust out her hands as if warding off the horrible thought. "No! Oh, no! They couldn't!"

"I'm afraid they do," replied Palfrey, sorrowfully. "Poor Mr. Tom."

Becky made a gesture toward the folding-door, and then came close to Jim, so that they could speak low enough to avoid any chance of being overheard by those in the next room.

"But his brother said he was innocent before he died, Jim," she said.

Again Palfrey shook his head mournfully.

"But the coroner said the dying gentleman's statement was not of much value under the circumstances, and, when the jury gave the verdict they did, I never saw any one in such a rage. And Becky," drawing a newspaper from the capacious pocket of his top-coat, "listen to what they say in to-night's paper: 'Inspector Clarkson has applied for a warrant against one of the parties in the Highgate murder case, which, we believe, has been granted.'"

"Oh-h-h!" groaned Becky. "If——"

But she was interrupted by a ring at the door-bell.

"Oh! gracious!" hurriedly rolling down her sleeves and smoothing her rumpled hair. "Run away, Jim, quick!"

Jim obeyed and hurried down the stairs to the regions below.

Becky opened the door, to find standing upon the steps Mr. Fletcher, who had been a frequent visitor at this house since he was first driven there by Palfrey some two months before.

There was a worried look upon Gillie's honest face as he entered the hall.

"Where's Mr. Tom, Becky?" he asked, anxiously.

"He went out with the doctor, sir."

"Did he say when he'd return?"

"No, sir. There was a letter for him, brought by a special messenger, which may have something to do with it."

Gillie looked more and more troubled, but before he could ask further questions, the door of the back parlor which led into the hall opened, and Gracie Chichester appeared.

As soon as she caught sight of Fletcher she closed the door softly behind her and came hurrying forward to greet him.

Becky slipped away, leaving the two alone together.

Gracie was dressed in deep mourning, and her eyes were red as if she had been weeping.

"I thought I heard you, Mr. Fletcher," she said. "I am so troubled about Tom. He's received a note to go to Scotland Yard on business connected with ——"

Her voice died away in a sob.

"Yes, yes, I know what you mean. Don't worry," said Gillie, consolingly. "There's a dear, good girl."

As he spoke he took her hand and led her into the front parlor.

Gracie sank down upon a sofa, and Gillie seated himself at her side.

"You've been very kind all through our trouble," she said, looking at him gratefully.

Gillie flushed with pleasure.

"Don't mention it. But I'm glad you think so, awfully glad."

"I do, indeed."

Gillie edged a little closer to her.

"Hem!" he began, nervously. "Then—then some day, when all the troubles are over, and the sorrow softened down a bit, perhaps I'll be rewarded."

Gracie cast down her eyes and the color deepened in her cheek.

"You deserve to be," she said, softly.

"But one so seldom gets what one deserves, while one can enjoy what one deserves," observed Gillie, a little incoherently. "You—you generally have the beef and pudding brought you after you have pegged out for the want of bread and cheese."

"I hope that won't be your case."

Gillie, feeling decidedly encouraged, again moved closer.

"It depends upon you," he declared, with a boldness which surprised himself.

"Upon me!" repeated Gracie, in a tone of surprise which we fear was not entirely genuine.

"Yes, do you remember in the dear old days that party on the roof-garden?"

"Indeed I do."

"Have you forgotten what I told you about falling down, down, down?"

"And you wanted some one to catch you?"

"Exactly, and I've been falling ever since, only ever so much faster; and the deeper I go, the more I long for the some one to catch me."

"Poor fellow! How dizzy you must be!"

They were very close together indeed now, and both had forgotten their recent anxiety.

"Dizzy!" murmured Gillie, eagerly. "I'm in a perfect whirl. My head keeps going round and round, and I'm sure I shall fall, if—if you don't stop me. Will you, Gracie?"

"Oh, Gillie!"

And then! Well, then he kissed her, and she let him.

"At last!" he murmured, ecstatically.

But in that blissful moment the sound of the opening of the folding-doors reached their ears.

They started apart, each to the very end of the sofa.

But they were just a little too late.

Aileen, for it was she who had entered, had seen enough to understand what had happened.

She softly closed the door, and then, coming forward a little, said, in her low, sweet voice:

"Come here, both of you."

They obeyed, Gracie blushing furiously and Gillie as red as a turkey cock's comb.

Aileen looked from one to the other, and then, with a smile, took a hand of each.

"Is it?" she said, interrogatively.

Gracie inclined her head, and Gillie nodded vigorously.

"I'm so glad!" And Aileen kissed her cousin warmly; then turning to Gillie, who was beaming with happiness, she added, cordially: "You deserve a good wife."

"Well, I hope not," was the sudden, unexpected response.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you see," laughed Gillie, "if I don't deserve a good wife, it's long odds I get one, don't you know?"

Aileen laughed outright herself at this absurdity.

"Oh, Aileen, dear, I'm so glad to hear you laugh again!" exclaimed Gracie. "And yet," remorsefully, "I suppose it's wrong to be happy just now."

"Not at all," replied Aileen, becoming suddenly grave. "We must welcome the sunshine whenever it comes." And then she sighed. "It's scarce enough."

"I'll go and sit with father," remarked Gracie, noticing how pale and weary her cousin looked. "I'm sure you need rest."

"No, dear. He's asleep."

"Shall I stay with Mr. Chichester for an hour or two?" suggested Gillie, feeling it to be his duty, but speaking in a half-hearted way, for he was longing to be alone with the girl he had at last won for his own. "That is, if I can be of any use, you know."

Aileen smiled faintly. She guessed what was passing in his mind.

"Yes, I think you can be of use," she answered.

"I'm so glad," said Gillie, in the most dismal tone imaginable. "What can I do?"

"Take Gracie out for a walk and bring the roses back to her cheeks."

Fletcher's face cleared as if by magic.

"What a brick you are!" he exclaimed, admiringly, as Gracie ran to put on her hat.

After they were gone Aileen sank wearily down in a chair, and covering her eyes with her hand, abandoned herself to the gloomy thoughts and forebodings which were oppressing her.

She had said, "Welcome the sunshine." But what could scatter the shadow, the terrible shadow which she felt was descending upon them all?

Harry's death had been bad enough, but this was worse, far worse. Suspicion pointed to Tom, her Tom! She felt it, she knew it! It was terrible. It was like living over a volcano. She was beginning to dread every footstep. Every ring at the door made her heart stand still with fear.

But no, it was wrong, it was wicked to think of such a thing. Harry with his dying breath had declared Tom innocent. That was surely enough. No one could believe him guilty. No! no! It was impossible! Impossible!

A low knock aroused her from her reflections, and she started to her feet, all her apprehensions again awakened.

“Come in!” she called, in a trembling voice.

The door opened, and there appeared upon the threshold a man whose face seemed familiar to her, but whom at the moment she could not place.

“The old lady down stairs said here,” observed the intruder, “so I came up. How do you do, Miss Millar? You don’t seem to remember me. My name’s Treacher—Edward Treacher, attorney at law.”

Then it flashed upon Aileen where she had seen him before, that night at Harry’s birthday party.

“Yes, I remember you now, Mr. Treacher,” she said, coldly.

“I beg pardon. I made a mistake. I expected to see Mr. Chichester, Jr.—Mr. Tom, you know. I had business with him, very important business. But I can’t wait. Good-day.”

Important business! Aileen at once wondered if it could have anything to do with what had been troubling her so deeply, and she determined to make an effort to detain the lawyer until Tom’s return.

“One moment,” she said, quickly. “He will be back shortly. And besides, I would like to ask you something.”

Treacher consulted his watch.

"Um!" he said, hesitatingly. "Well, I can give you five minutes, but no more. I have an important appointment, and I can't break it."

"Tell me," said Aileen, feeling more than ever that this visit meant something serious. "Is—is this business connected with—with——"

She paused, not knowing how to finish. But Treacher understood.

"Ye-es," he said, slowly. "Very sad! Very sad indeed! Two brothers, too."

"But he didn't do it!" exclaimed Aileen, indignantly.

A peculiar smile played about the lawyer's thin lips, and he fixed his little eyes scrutinizingly upon the girl's flushed face.

"Who? I didn't know any one had been accused, at least not yet. But maybe some one will be soon, unless—unless——"

"Unless what?" demanded Aileen, impatiently, feeling confident now that her fears had not been misplaced. "Speak out! Tell me what you can!"

Treacher's hesitation vanished. He saw that the time had come for a display of apparent frankness.

He advanced toward Aileen and spoke more quickly than was his wont.

"Every moment suspicions and facts are becoming stronger against Tom Chichester. You know for

what. 'There's only one link missing, and they may find it.'

"He is innocent!"

"Very likely," replied Treacher, dryly, and in a manner that was anything but encouraging. "But the innocent are hanged sometimes, indeed frequently."

The color died out of Aileen's cheeks, and a suppressed cry of horror broke from her lips.

"Now, if the worst comes to the worst," continued Treacher, "his safety rests in two people's hands."

"Tell me—whose? I beg! I pray!"

"Yours and mine!"

"Yours and mine?"

"Exactly! Look here!" with a change of manner, and as if taking a sudden resolution, "I'll beat about the bush no longer. I didn't come to see Tom Chichester. I came to see you. The question is, will you save him?"

Would she save him? She would give the last drop of her blood for Tom! But somehow she did not wholly trust this man, and so she hesitated.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked, after a moment's silence.

"To keep him from a prison certainly, from the gallows perhaps," replied Treacher, impressively.

"Come with me. I'll bring you face to face with

some one who saw the whole affair, and then you'll be able to prove Chichester blameless."

"You swear this?" exclaimed Aileen, with her hands pressed against her breast as if to still the throbbing of her heart.

"Yes."

"Then—then why don't you prove it yourself?"

This was an unexpected question, and one difficult to answer, but the wily lawyer was equal to the occasion.

"Well, you see, it's not professional. Besides, I want paying for my trouble."

"Oh, I'll pay you!" eagerly.

"Yes, I expect you to." And in that he spoke only the truth. "But that's not all. I can't do this business alone. Moments are precious. I know what's in the wind. Will you come with me or not?"

Aileen had been fighting with herself all through this speech. Something warned her that there might be treachery somewhere. And yet, suppose Tom really was in danger, as she had only too good reason to suppose, and this lawyer was speaking the truth when he said that she alone could save him? Save him! Save her Tom! Yes, she would risk anything for that.

"I will go with you," she said, at last, thrusting aside her tremors and thinking only of the man she loved whose fate might rest in her hands. "Wait

here a moment. I must speak to my uncle before I leave. Where shall I tell him I'm going?"

"To my house at Highgate. I've a cab at the door. You'll be back in no time."

Aileen looked at him, her lips trembling and her beautiful eyes full of wistful appeal.

"Mr. Treacher, can I trust you?"

For a brief space, just a little touched by her helplessness, the lawyer's conscience smote him; yet not strongly nor for long.

"Yes, you can, Miss Millar," he said, at last, regarding her with unwavering steadiness.

And with this assertion Aileen was forced to be content. She moved away and vanished into the back room.

Treacher chuckled inaudibly to himself. The plan had worked admirably. It was really an excellent idea of Gridston's.

Once safe in the villa at Highgate, it would not be a difficult matter to intimidate this frail girl, and, under promise of clearing young Chichester, to induce her to sign a document which would amply repay Treacher for his trouble. To be sure, Gridston had further designs, but whether these were successful or not mattered but little to the lawyer, so long as his own pockets were well lined.

When Aileen returned she was dressed in hat and

cloak, and was rather nervously putting on her gloves.

"Come, Mr. Treacher, I am ready," she said.

"Good!"

As they passed out into the hall, Becky Vetch came toward them.

"I'm going out, Becky," said Aileen. "When Miss Gracie comes home, tell her I have gone out with this gentleman, Mr. Treacher, on important business and that I shall be back very soon."

"Very well, miss," answered Becky, a little anxiously. "But where shall I say you've gone to, miss?"

"Say I'm trying to save us all from a fearful trouble and ask them to pray for my success."

* * * * *

As the cab drove away from the door a tall gentleman, with a clean-shaven, intelligent face, was coming up the street.

He glanced toward the cab, and as his keen eyes rested upon the occupants, he started slightly, paused, and half turned, as if with the intention of following.

But in a moment he evidently changed his mind, for he resumed his first course, and walked slowly along until the cab had vanished around the corner.

Then he mounted the steps of the Widow Vetch's lodging-house and rang the bell.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LAST LINK.

As the door closed behind Aileen and the lawyer Becky stood staring after them for a moment.

The clever little girl scarcely understood the situation.

That was a most extraordinary speech of Miss Aileen's. To save all of us from a fearful trouble! What could she have meant?

"I don't like that man," muttered Becky to herself. "Traicher! Traicher! I wonder how he spells his name?"

She was worried, but she was also at a loss as to what to do. At all events, she thought, after a moment, it was too late now to do anything. So, with a sigh, she turned away to go down stairs.

But, just as she did so, there came a peal at the bell.

Becky, thinking those whom she had been speculating about had returned, ran to the door.

But no! It was not Miss Aileen, but a man whom Becky, with a shiver of dismay, recognized at once.

Still, she did not think it best to betray this recognition.

"What do you want, sir, please?" she asked, in the most matter-of-fact way that, under the circumstances, she could assume.

"Is Mr. Thomas Chichester at home?" asked the gentleman, quietly.

"No, sir," replied Becky, thankful that he was not, and she could answer truthfully. "He left word that if anybody called, particularly, that he was gone to Scotland. Are you particular?"

"Yes, very," replied the visitor. "You mean Scotland Yard, though."

"How do you know?" retorted Becky, placing her arms akimbo, and prepared to fight out the matter to the last extent.

No one knew better than the gentleman at the door where Tom had gone, as it was he who had sent the message.

"Never mind," he answered, with a wave of his hand, and then he asked, apparently apropos of nothing. "Is the old gentleman better?"

"Who told you he'd been ill?" queried Becky, in the most aggressive manner possible.

"Never mind."

"But I do!" losing her temper.

"Now don't get excited, my young friend," said the gentleman, in a way which was intended to be

soothing, but which exasperated Becky, knowing what she did. "Don't think I ask out of any idle curiosity. No, on the contrary."

Becky was quite ready to snap out at him, and even to close the door in his face, but just at that moment the door of the front drawing-room opened, and a thin, white-faced old man appeared upon the threshold. He was clothed in a loose-fitting dressing-gown, and looked as if he were just recovering from a serious illness, which indeed was the truth.

"Where is Aileen?" he asked, in a querulous voice.

The gentleman at the door gave him one look.

"That is the very man I want," he thought to himself. "If I can get three minutes with him, my case will be complete."

"Miss Aileen has gone out with Mr. Treacher, sir," answered Becky, turning with a look of concern toward Mr. Chichester.

Treacher! So the keen-faced man had not been mistaken. It was that lawyer renowned for his questionable methods whom he had seen in the cab. He almost regretted now that he had not obeyed his first impulse and followed him. Who could tell what deviltry was on foot there?

Mr. Clarkson, police inspector of Scotland Yard, was, in spite of his calling, which is apt to make one callous, a man of large sympathies. Perhaps for that

very reason he was one of the most valuable members of the London detective force. He was less liable, for the sake of gain, to make false accusations, and to insist that his first diagnosis of the case was right, even when he ought to know that it was wrong.

But still, he knew how to do his duty. He, therefore, pushed by Becky and approached Mr. Chichester.

"Here's some one to see Mr. Thomas, sir," said Becky, irritated, and worried as well.

"Never mind," said Clarkson, calmly. "This gentleman will do equally well." Then, bowing to Mr. Chichester, he added, with the utmost courtesy: "I should like two minutes' conversation with you."

Mr. Chichester, a little dazed, motioned him to enter the parlor, drawing back to allow him to pass.

Becky, with compressed lips, followed. She knew the invalid was alone, and, plucky little girl that she was, she was determined to protect him.

The gentleman from Scotland Yard raised his eyebrows at her unsolicited entrance.

"I should like to speak to this gentleman in private," he said.

Becky tossed her head.

"I understand," she answered, but making no movement to obey the implied command. "You want me to leave you alone with him, but I don't think it's safe. I shall stay where I am."

Without waiting for the undesired and undesirable guest, as he appeared to her, to answer, she caught Mr. Chichester gently by the arm, and leading him to an arm-chair in front of the fire, installed him comfortably therein.

Clarkson was a little nonplused, not a little to his amusement, however, for the inspector had a certain sense of humor.

"Indeed!" he ejaculated, with an uplifting of his brows.

Becky, with one hand resting upon the back of Mr. Chichester's chair in a protecting manner, faced the speaker with an exhibition of far more courage than she really felt at heart.

"Yes. You see, he's been very ill, and he's weak, and you might lead him on to say things he'd be sorry for afterward, because——" She hesitated just a second, and then went on, boldly: "Because I know who you are, though you're dressed different. You're Inspector Clarkson, who first brought in the bad news."

As if galvanized into life, old Mr. Chichester, whose manner hitherto had been listless and lifeless, when he heard these words, leaped excitedly from his chair.

"What's that!" he exclaimed, tremulously, "Inspector Clarkson!"

To Becky's dismay, who had never for a moment

anticipated that her words would have such an effect, he staggered toward the member of the police force, with both arms extended.

"Tell me! Have they—have they found the murderer of my son?"

"No, sir," replied Clarkson, gently, but determined to do his duty, painful as it might be to his feelings as a man. "No, sir. But, with your help, I think I shall be able to lay my hands on him."

The poor old man trembled all over, and his eyes flashed at the thought that the death of his beloved son might possibly be avenged.

"My help!" he replied, his voice rising almost to a shriek in his excitement. "I'll do anything—anything—to avenge my Harry! Becky, Becky, leave the room!"

Poor Becky, thus adjured, felt that, much against her will as it was, she would be forced to obey, but the inspector stopped her with a gesture.

"No," he said, with a quiet authority, in strong contrast to the agitation of Mr. Chichester, "on second thought, you'd better stay, and—listen! You'll be a good witness."

Becky did not like the tone in which these words were spoken, but, although with inward perturbation, she remained where she was, an unhappy listener to the scene which ensued.

"You see, sir," said Clarkson, addressing Mr. Chi-

chester, "you've been too ill to give evidence before, but now I want to ask you a question or two."

"Go on," replied the old gentleman, only too anxious with the object in view to give any information in his power.

Clarkson, very careful not to alarm him, began his examination, for examination it was, in the mildest manner possible.

"You hadn't seen either of your sons for some time before the night of the crime?"

"No. Tom for over a year, and—and the other for several months."

"Was the unfortunate gentleman on good terms with all his relations before this separation?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Chichester, leaning back against the chair, but fighting with all his strength against his weakness in order to give all the information in his power, not dreaming for a moment whom this information was tending to incriminate. "Yes, all—that is, all but——"

"His brother, eh?" suggested the inspector.

"His brother," acknowledged Mr. Chichester, sorrowfully, though unsuspectingly. "Yes."

"Something about a lady, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

At this Clarkson suddenly produced two pistols, and advancing, held them out for the old man's inspection.

"Look at these pistols," he said, with an abruptness which was startling and which was meant to be so. "One of them was the cause of your son's death, and one your oldest son acknowledges to be his, or rather yours. Now, Mr. Chichester, which do you recognize?"

It was a cruel thing to do, considering the old gentleman's condition, and Clarkson knew it, but he sternly crushed back everything except the sense of what his duty demanded of him—the discovery of the murderer by any and all means in his power.

Mr. Chichester bent forward and looked closely at the two weapons produced for his examination.

Then he pointed a quivering finger toward one of them.

"That is the one my son Tom took from me," he said.

A look of satisfaction, not unmingled with pity, stole over the inspector's face. He returned the pistols to his pocket, announcing, as he did so:

"And that is the one the crime was committed with."

At this Becky, realizing it all, turned to fly, but as she did so, she confronted Tom Chichester, who had entered unperceived and had heard it all.

He was standing in the door-way with white, set face.

Tom put his hand to his lips, enjoining silence, and Becky, tremblingly drew back.

For a moment Mr. Chichester did not understand all that his admission implied. Then, as it dawned upon him, he staggered back with a cry of horror.

“What! What do you say?”

“That my case is complete,” replied the detective, triumphantly, his professional pride for the moment coming to the fore and driving back all softer feelings. “And I shall be compelled to arrest Mr. Thomas Chichester for the murder of his brother!”

At this Tom stepped forward, startling equally the inspector and his father.

With head thrown back and figure drawn proudly up to its full height, he announced, bravely:

“Here I am! Take me! I’m not going to run away, even from such a charge as that!”

At the sound of his voice, Clarkson turned with a start.

But the effect upon Mr. Chichester was even more violent.

With arms outstretched, he staggered toward his son, realizing most fully what he had innocently done.

“Oh, Tom, forgive me!” he moaned. “I didn’t know! I didn’t know!”

Tom sprang forward and caught his father in his arms.

"There's nothing to forgive, father," he said, tenderly. "You were asked a question which neither Gillie nor myself could answer at the inquest. Remember the pistol was in our hands only a moment. You have spoken the truth, and, whatever the consequences may be, you are not to blame."

He led his father to the chair and forced him down gently into it.

"Now, sir," he said, turning to the inspector, who had been quietly watching the scene, "what do you intend to do?"

"I'm very sorry," returned Clarkson, slowly, and the tone of his voice showed that he was sincere, "but you must come with me."

"Arrested!"

The inspector bowed.

"My son! My son!" moaned the old man, in agony.

"Don't give way, dad," said Tom, patting him encouragingly upon the shoulder. "I'm not the first innocent man to go to jail."

Clarkson was puzzled. He had arrested many a supposed criminal, but none who had taken the matter in this way, with the quiet confidence that all would end well. And yet the proofs were overwhelmingly against him.

"Where's my sister, Becky, and Miss Millar?"

asked Tom, turning to the little maid, whose eyes were full of tears.

"Miss Gracie is out with Mr. Fletcher," whimpered Becky, "and Miss Aileen went away in a hurry with a—a Mr. Treacher."

Then, unable to control her emotion longer, she flung her apron over her head and rushed from the room.

A look of alarm passed over Tom's face.

"'Treacher!'" he exclaimed. "'Aileen with that scoundrel?'"

"I quite agree with you," put in Clarkson. "I saw them drive away in a cab and didn't like it. I know that man Treacher by reputation, and know nothing good of him. But," reluctantly, "I'm afraid we must be moving."

"You'll surely let me wait until my friends come back," ejaculated Tom, thinking of the alarm that would be caused, if the girls returned and heard his father's story, which he knew would be anything but coherent.

Clarkson bit his lip. Although belonging to the police force, he was a man whose sympathies were still alive. They had not been crushed out by his profession.

"I regret it's my duty," he replied, "to place you in—well—a place of safety as soon as possible."

Tom, his heart like lead in his breast, turned

toward his trembling father to say what he could to encourage him.

But just then the tear-stained face of Becky appeared at the door.

"If you please, sir," she said, "there's a gentleman to see you, sir."

Before Tom could speak there pushed by her a man whose general appearance proclaimed that he was an upper servant of some sort—in other words, a gentleman's gentleman.

"Which one of you is Mr. Thomas Chichester?" he asked.

"I am," replied Tom, stepping forward.

"Then, sir," extending a crumpled note, "I was to give you this."

Tom took the paper and opened it.

"*I'm a prisoner in Gridston's house at Highgate,*" he read aloud. "*You don't know me, but I know you, or, rather, of you. Save me if you can! I know who murdered your brother. Fretly Burnsides.*"

The paper fell from Tom's nerveless fingers.

"Do you hear that?" he cried, excitedly, addressing Inspector Clarkson.

The police official turned to the messenger who had brought the communication.

"What do you know of this?" he asked, sternly, fixing his piercing eyes upon the man's face.

The man hesitated, and then blurted out:

"I was promised twenty pounds if I delivered it."

"Who are you?"

"I was Captain Gridston's valet, but I was discharged this morning."

"I'll go at once!" exclaimed Tom, impulsively.

"You forget you're under arrest," retorted the inspector, restraining him with a gesture.

The face of the bearer of the note expressed the most profound surprise at this statement.

"But surely," exclaimed Tom, pleadingly, and in the greatest excitement, "you'll give me a chance to find the murderer of my brother and to save myself!"

It was a very difficult position in which the inspector was placed. On the one hand was an infringement of his duty, on the other the possibility of refusing an innocent man the chance of saving his neck from the gallows.

He hesitated, glanced scrutinizingly at the man who was virtually his prisoner, and then made up his mind to take the chances. After all, he was a man before being a policeman.

"Yes, I will!" he declared, "for," with the force of conviction, "I don't believe you're guilty! The law says I mustn't lose sight of you. Well, I won't! For I'll come and help you if I can! It may save a mistake, and my idea of police work is to prevent crime as well as to discover it."

Tom started forward and caught the inspector's hand in a firm grasp.

"God bless you!" he muttered, brokenly. "You're a gentleman!"

CHAPTER XII.

BIRDS OF PREY.

It was the Panther's birthday. And she had arranged an entertainment on a scale of magnificence which was unprecedented even for her whose extravagance had become proverbial.

After the terrible shock caused by her lover's sudden death, Cynthia had been invisible for an entire week, a week during which she had really suffered, and when the thought of becoming an inmate of a convent and within those sacred walls atoning for the faults and sins of her life, had seriously entered her mind.

But then she had suddenly flashed forth again among her old associates, more superb, more audacious than ever. Her equipages, her gowns, her jewels, her reckless prodigality became the talk of the town.

She flew from one dissipation to another with a mad, feverish gayety, trying to seek that forgetfulness which never came.

With her beauty and her vogue, she had no lack of admirers, and men were now simply her prey, objects

to be fascinated, to dazzle for a brief hour, and then, stripped of all, to be left with a cynical laugh, to struggle through or leave their ruined lives as pleased them best.

And now, on her natal day, she had determined upon this entertainment which should be the acme of folly, for which money should be flung away with both hands, as if it were the merest dirt.

Forgetfulness, forgetfulness was all she asked, if only for that one night.

Was it her conscience that was troubling her, or was it grief for the untimely fate of the one man she had loved as well as it was in her nature to love any one? Who can tell? Probably she herself would have found it impossible to answer this question.

At all events she flung herself, heart and soul, into the preparations for her birthday *fete*.

The decorations were to be magnificent, the supper superb, and the music the finest procurable for money; and the Panther, queen as she was of her own peculiar world, had no lack of the golden coin of the realm. Neither Mabel Gray nor Cora Pearl, at the height of their famous or infamous careers, was more renowned, more sought after, more adored by the gilded youth than she.

And this entertainment to-night, leaving out all its gorgeousness, was to be unique in at least one respect. The male sex was to be strictly excluded.

Taken by a sudden freak, the Panther had decided that only women were to be received by her for that one evening.

In vain had Gridston, who still retained his position as "*l'ami de la maison*," protested against this decision. Cynthia had remained firm.

The captain, as he styled himself, had been anything but easy in his mind for some time after the tragedy in the grounds of the Highgate villa, but, as day after day went by and no suspicion seemed to attach itself to him, he recovered his wonted serenity. He was in particularly good spirits to-night. The girl, whom, or rather whose fortune, he had made up his mind to marry had been lured into his power, and he felt confident he could play upon her weakness so as to secure his own ends.

There was the light of anticipated triumph in his eyes as he saw his jackal, Treacher, enter the room, where he was waiting to hear his report as to the first interview with Miss Millar.

"Well, how did you get on?" he asked, breathlessly.

"Badly," replied the lawyer, with a crest-fallen air.

"How do you mean?" with angry disappointment.

"Well, I offered to prove Tom Chichester innocent in return for a certain sum of money and her acceptance of you for a husband."

"And?"

"She refused point-blank."

Gridston pulled his mustache furiously.

"You offered to clear Tom Chichester, you say?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"That Tom Chichester could clear himself."

"Can he? I think not. Not without our aid. Our testimony would have fixed the crime conclusively upon that madman, Burnsides. Where is she now?"

"In the study."

"You fool!" burst out Gridston.

But Treacher checked him by holding up a key.

"The door is locked," he said, hurriedly. "She's quite safe. And she must be kept so. Our offer's a dangerous one. We're obliged to be careful. But in a few hours she's bound to come to her senses. Then," with a grin that was full of significance, "I'll provide her with our guilty man. By the way, how is he?"

"Oh, he's well enough—considering," answered Gridston, with a shudder.

"Who's looking after him?"

"My servant, Amos, was, but I sacked him this morning."

"Why?"

"Because I refused to double his wages."

"Humph!" ejaculated Treacher, reflectively. "He suspects something. Be careful. Get Burnsides away

from here as soon as possible, to some other place."

"We'll arrange that to-morrow."

The grewsome promise that Gridston had given to the Panther had not been fulfilled. Fretly Burnsides was still alive. After what had occurred, it would have been more than dangerous to have the villa at Highgate the scene of a second violent death. But Burnsides was kept a close prisoner in a strongly barricaded room at the top of the house. There was more reason than ever to allow him no communication with the outside world.

On the night that Harry Chichester had been shot Burnsides had recovered his consciousness in time to see the flash of the pistol upon the balcony. Both Gridston and Cynthia were aware of this, but while the very thought that his secret was known caused the man spasms of terror, the woman appeared to care little or not at all. The present was all she seemed to think about, how to extract the utmost of reckless excitement out of the passing hour. The past she thrust resolutely away from her, and the future inspired her with neither hope nor fear.

As she swept to-night into the anteroom where Gridston and Treacher were, thus interrupting their conversation, she was such a glorious picture in her superb, audacious beauty that both men involuntarily caught their breath in admiration.

She was magnificently gowned in a robe of pale pink satin, heavily embroidered, with a train of a deeper shade, brocaded in gold and silver.

Upon the masses of her silky black hair rested a tiara of diamonds and rubies, and upon her neck and arms and from a girdle which she wore about her waist, flashed gems worthy of a prince's ransom.

And no one knew better how to carry off all this gorgeousness than the Panther. She wore her brocade and jewels with the grace and haughty disdain of an empress.

She was a trifle thinner than she had been, perhaps, her cheek glowed with a brighter carmine and her beautiful eyes flashed with a more gleaming fire. Her movements were also a little more rapid, a little more nervous than before, but quite as graceful, with all the grace of a lithe, lissome ranger of the virgin forests.

As her eyes met those of Gridston the heavy lids drooped disdainfully, vailing the somnolent fires below. She had always, except just at first, felt more or less of a contempt for the man, but of late there had been times when she positively hated him. Still, partly from the force of habit, partly for the reason that he was still useful to her, she had not broken with him yet.

"Rose told me you wanted me," she said, curtly.

"What is it? Be as quick as you can. And leave the house. My guests are arriving."

Gridston came forward a little, his senses in a whirl at the beauty of this woman he had loved so long and so vainly; that is, so far as any return of his passion was concerned.

"You really insist on carrying out this whim of yours?" he asked, deprecatingly, knowing full well, however, that his influence was nil.

"Certainly," replied the Panther, with a cold smile that was anything but flattering to him, had Gridston known how to interpret it. "Yes, to-night is my birthday supper, and I'll not have a man in the place. I've an idea to be independent for once. Now go!"

The last injunction was spoken with such suppressed force that Gridston could not but understand, and, loving her as he did, for a moment his temper got the best of him.

He came close to her, and hissed in her ear:

"Go, you say! Not a man here, eh? How about the man up stairs? The one who knows everything. Your husband—how about him?"

But if he hoped to intimidate Cynthia Dell, to give her the name by which she was known, he certainly reckoned without his hostess.

She flashed upon him one glance, surcharged with

contempt, and then she answered, frigidly and confidently:

"We have nothing to fear from him."

Gridston staggered back, a horrible yet to him grateful suspicion entering his mind.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed, in a half-whisper.

"I deemed it advisable to interview him this evening," replied Cynthia, nonchalantly.

"And?"

"His lips are sealed forever."

Gridston started back.

"Dead!" he faltered.

Cynthia laughed. She was thoroughly enjoying the Tantalus-like torture to which she had put him.

"Oh, no," she said, with exasperating slowness, "but silent as the tomb."

"Explain, Cynthia!"

"You really wish it?"

"Yes, yes!"

"I don't know why I should since if you believe me, I have already removed the cause of any fear on your part. But perhaps, after all," with the utmost significance, "you are the one who has the most cause for fear."

Treacher, who knew all the circumstances of the case, listened to this diabolical banter with the keenest appreciation. Necessary though he was to him,

he had no love for his principal, and he could not but enjoy the suspense which he knew he was undergoing.

"Cynthia!" exclaimed Gridston, piteously. "Tell me what you mean!"

"Why, don't you understand?" she returned, with a sneer that was absolutely and intentionally insulting. "Do you think I need material weapons to quiet him? I told him I was guilty, I," with a certain self-contempt which she really felt and the outward expression of which she could not wholly repress, "I, the woman he is still fool enough to love. I, his wife! Do you understand now?"

Gridston breathed a deep sigh of relief. He did understand, and recognized fully what a stroke of genius such a declaration was. Burnsides would never accuse this woman whom he adored, evil star though she had been of his life. And, more than all, this removed the one witness whom Gridston feared, most effectually closing his mouth.

"Upon my word," he exclaimed, with undisguised admiration, "Cynthia, you are a female Macchiavelli!"

The Panther shrugged her white shoulders. His compliments or his censures were alike indifferent to her.

"Perhaps," she said, scornfully. "Now go!"

Gridston was about to obey, but was arrested by Treacher saying, in his high-pitched voice:

"I beg your pardon, madame, just one word."

The Panther's nostrils dilated, and she looked at the attorney as a goddess might have contemplated some wretched mortal who dared to address her.

"Go on," she said, briefly.

Treacher cleared his throat, and then said, with a Uriah Heep humbleness:

"I gave you my advice about Miss Millar before Captain Gridston arrived. The lady is still in the study, and obstinate. It is best to keep her there. You understand."

A flash of diabolical joy passed over Cynthia's face, only to fade instantly away. This Aileen, whom she hated instinctively, with such hatred as only women of her class and disposition can feel toward the pure of her sex, was beneath her roof, in her power! And that power she was determined to use ruthlessly. But she gave no outward expression to this resolution.

On the contrary, with the most careless manner in the world, she took the key of the study which Treacher extended to her.

"I'll put Rose there to watch," she said, coldly. "I can depend upon her."

Treacher bowed. Somehow this woman always intimidated him. With a few confused words, which, being interpreted, meant a wish of many happy re-

turns of the day, he left the room, and, shortly afterward, the house.

"Good-night, Cynthia," said Gridston, feeling himself dismissed. "Take care of your guests. And remember," with feverish impressiveness, "our lives depend upon two of them. Good-night."

"Good-night," responded Cynthia, with a careless nod of her queenly head.

As Gridston disappeared, her eyes contracted with a peculiar, sinister expression.

"You put a high value on your own life, my friend," she muttered, half aloud. And then, with a heavy sigh and a weary out-flinging of her bejeweled hands, she added: "For myself, I'm tired of it all!"

She moved slowly away to go to her guests, but was met on the threshold by her maid, Rose, who, as she caught sight of her mistress, exclaimed, in an agitated tone:

"If you please, ma'am, I've received a telegram from Amos, Captain Gridston's servant, you know, ma'am."

Cynthia paused. One of her good points was that she was never rude to those she paid to serve her.

"And your sweetheart," she said, with a weary smile. "Well, what of it?"

"There's something in it I thought you'd like to know. Read it, ma'am," extending the yellow slip of paper.

Cynthia took it and glanced at it at first perfunctorily, and then with eager interest.

“What’s this?” she cried. “*Tell your mistress that Mr. Thomas Chichester was arrested to-night for the murder of his brother.*”

Who can tell what it was that impelled Amos to send such a telegram? Perhaps it was partially to give Rose information that would gain her mistress’ favor, but more likely it was far more due to that fascination which the Panther exercised over the vast majority of men, both of high and low degree.

Most certainly the news was pleasing to the one it was intended to please.

“You have brought me the best news, Rose, I have had for years! You shall be paid for it! Go!”

Left alone, the Panther laughed aloud with fiendish exultation.

“Harry, I can avenge you at last!” she murmured, with fierce, savage joy. “The woman I detest is in this house, in my power, the man I hate in prison. I am almost, *almost* happy!”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PANTHER'S BIRTHDAY.

The double drawing-rooms of the Panther's villa were ablaze with light, and filled with brilliantly attired women of all shades of complexion, both natural and assumed.

Not a masculine black-coat among them all. Even the servants, who circulated the champagne, of which there was a never-ending flow, were girls in the silk stockings, plush breeches, and liveried coats of footmen.

The music of the latest comic operas floated through the perfumed atmosphere from a band concealed behind a screen of palms, a band composed of female musicians from Vienna.

The music, it must be confessed, however, was not listened to, nor, if any one had desired, would it have been possible to enjoy it, so persistent was the chatter and so loud the laughter of the guests who were all just a little exhilarated by the wine they had imbibed in honor of their hostess.

The Panther was here, there, and everywhere, graceful as a houri, overflowing with musical laugh-

ter, and scintillating with wit. To have seen her, a stranger would have said that she was the happiest woman in the world, one who did not know what care was.

Upon a large table at one end of the room was piled a heterogeneous, glittering mass, the birthday gifts offered by the women to their acknowledged leader, the one who was pre-eminent among them all for beauty and intellect.

Cynthia paused near the table and cast a half-contemptuous, half-gratified glance at its contents. She cared little for the worth of the gifts, which was not inconsiderable, and still less for the motive that prompted their bestowal, which she reckoned at its just worth. But the homage implied in the recognition of her claims as Queen of Bohemia, pleased her. She was not a woman to brook a rival.

She faced the company, and raised one white hand, blazing with gems, to command silence.

Gradually the voices and laughter died away.

"My dear friends," said the Panther, in that peculiarly rich, sensuous voice of hers, as she glanced from one to the other with a brilliant smile, "really I hardly know how to thank you. Your presents are exquisite, your generosity is overwhelming."

"Bah," laughed a girl with hair of such a vivid and pronounced yellow that it was clear to the most casual observer that the hue was due to art rather

than to nature. "My dear, we don't pay for them."

"Lots more where they came from," chimed in another.

"Yes," added a third, with a burst of cynical laughter, "a pound or two more or less, what does it matter?"

Amid the general merriment at the expense of the foolish members of the opposite sex who thus permitted their money to be squandered, one of the tall girl footmen, to commit an Irish bull, announced, in a shrill voice:

"Mrs. Moreland."

All turned toward the door as Beatrice came rustling in, clad in a robe which was, to say the least, startling, being an extraordinary mixture of nearly all the colors of the rainbow.

A murmur, half-admiring, half-sarcastic, went around.

"My dear Beatrice," murmured Cynthia, gliding forward with outstretched hands. "You have come at last!"

The two women exchanged a kiss, as they generally did, even though at heart they were enemies and rivals, and each was aware of the fact.

"Why so late?" asked the hostess.

An expression of sadness swept over Beatrice's face.

"Poor Clementine!" she said, with a sorrowful shake of her blonde head. "The consumption, you know."

Beatrice Moreland, in spite of her vagaries and her hasty temper, was not a bad woman at heart. Many of her sisters, who had been less fortunate pecuniarily than herself, could have told of acts of kindness and generosity performed by her hands.

"Is she dead?" asked Cynthia.

"Yes. In the hospital, two hours ago. I couldn't leave her."

"Poor Clementine! You knew her well, did you not?"

"Yes. We were at school together in the country," replied Beatrice, turning away with a sigh.

Many of the other women present had also known the unfortunate girl and felt an instant's commiseration for her untimely fate. But this was no time nor place for mourning, so very shortly Clementine was forgotten and the conversation was as lively and the laughter as loud as ever.

"Did you ever see such a dress?" whispered the yellow-haired girl to the one who was seated beside her, with a nod of her head toward Beatrice.

"She looks like a stained-glass window," laughed her companion.

Meanwhile, all unconscious of the somewhat ill-natured criticism, for the sharp tongue of the brill-

iantly arrayed woman had rendered her rather unpopular with her associates, Beatrice had turned again to the Panther.

"Oh, I was nearly forgetting," she said, with a peculiar smile. "My dear girl, let me wish you many, many happy returns of this, your birthday supper. Pray accept my little present."

As she spoke she extended to Cynthia a small mahogany box.

"Thanks, Beatrice, many thanks," said the Panther, graciously, taking the box and opening it.

As her eyes rested upon the contents she could not repress a slight start.

"Pistols!"

"Yes, dear," said Beatrice, sweetly, but with a malicious smile hovering about her lips. "I chose them because they are pretty to look at and may be useful."

"Ah, yes."

Beatrice glanced at her askance, and could not resist making the bitter speech which darted into her head.

"You know, dear, you have so many enemies," she said, slowly and with emphasis.

But clever as she was, Beatrice Moreland was no match for the Panther in a duel of words, either with the foils on or off.

"Yes," assented Cynthia, calmly, taking the pis-

tols from the box and examining them, "and none more dangerous than myself."

She replaced the weapons and laid the box upon the table with the other presents. Then she faced the donor. Her lips were smiling, but there was a dangerous gleam in the depths of her dark eyes.

"Thanks for your present, Beatrice," she said, without a tremor in her voice to betray her real feelings. "As you say, I have many enemies, especially among my friends. It's always well to be prepared."

Beatrice flushed, and her quick temper would probably have betrayed her into making some ill-advised retort, had not a bevy of women just at that moment, come merrily forward.

"And now Beatrice is here," cried the yellow-haired girl, "we can drink your health. She's kept us thirsty long enough."

Cynthia made a sign to the servants, and soon every one present was furnished with a glass of the golden, sparkling liquid.

"Come, Beatrice, propose her health."

"I don't mind," replied Beatrice, good-humoredly, her momentary irritation vanished. Raising her glass high in air, she continued, in a ringing voice: "Here's to the health and fortune of our friend! Call her what you like, my dears—Cynthia! Aspasia! Panther! Call her as you love her best! All must do her homage. This is her palace, she is on her throne.

Every woman beneath this roof must drink—drink a short life and a merry reign to her, our queen.”

The toast was drank enthusiastically.

The Panther accepted the compliment smilingly, but she was thinking less of the honor paid to her than of an idea which had suggested itself by certain words in Beatrice's speech.

She had said: “Every woman beneath this roof.” But there was one woman there who was not drinking her health—that girl who was a prisoner in the study, that Aileen but for whom Harry might have been alive that day, that Aileen whom she had always hated.

She looked around upon the flushed Bacchante-like faces by which she was surrounded, and her resolution was taken.

“I'll have her brought here!” she thought to herself, viciously. “I'll break her heart!”

The guests were clamoring for another toast.

“Stop!” rang out the Panther's voice.

When quiet was restored she said:

“Beatrice has said all must drink my health.”

“Well?”

“You said every woman in this house, didn't you, Beatrice?”

“Yes,” replied Beatrice, wonderingly, “and all have done so.”

“No,” retorted the Panther, her nostrils dilating

with joy at the thought of the punishment she was about to inflict. "No! There is one woman who has not drank, a woman locked in the study up stairs."

Instantly there was a Babel of cries.

"A woman!"

"Bring her here!"

"She must drink the health!"

"Bring her in!"

Cynthia beckoned one of the servants to her, and handed her the key of the study, at the same time whispering a few words in her ear.

As the servant disappeared on her errand, Beatrice came close to Cynthia.

"Who is this girl?" she asked, in a low tone.

The Panther hesitated for a moment, and then replied, defiantly:

"Well, if you must know, it's Aileen Millar!"

Beatrice started. She had never seen Miss Millar, but she had heard of her and knew that she was Harry Chichester's cousin. How did it happen that she was in that house? But there was no time to solve the mystery now.

"Oh, Cynthia," she said, imploringly, "surely you won't bring her here!"

"Why not?" with a haughty stare.

Before Beatrice could reply the servant returned.

"Well?" asked Cynthia.

"She refuses to come, madame."

"Refuses!" angrily. "She must come! I insist!"

"Better not, perhaps," warned Beatrice.

"I insist!" repeated Cynthia, imperiously. "Go, some of you, and bring her here."

Half a dozen of the women ran from the room.

Beatrice said nothing more. She knew that it would be useless, but she made up her mind to befriend the girl if she could.

Aileen Millar had passed a most miserable two hours, cooped up as she was in the study. She had driven to this house with Treacher, half afraid, half confident. Tom's danger blinded her to almost any other consideration. But, after she was inclosed in the study with Treacher, and the rascally lawyer had made her the proposition which he did, she understood that she had been trapped, and she refused his propositions with the scorn that they deserved.

But when Treacher left the room and locked the door behind him she knew, with a shiver of horror, that she had been tricked and that she was a prisoner.

She flew to the windows, but there was no escape there. The gardens below loomed darkly before her, and to attempt to leap from the windows meant probable, if not certain, death.

What should she do? She flung herself down in a chair and buried her face in her hands. The spider had ingeniously invited the fly into the web, and the fly had ingenuously accepted the invitation.

Become that man's wife? Never! And yet if Tom's life depended upon it, what could she do? Better far an existence of misery for herself than that the man she loved, the only man she had ever loved, should be made to suffer unjustly.

After a while the sound of merriment from below came to her ears. Raising her head, she listened eagerly, but nothing save the confused murmur of voices and laughter reached her.

What was this place into which she had been lured?

After what seemed to her hours of misery the key turned in the lock, and the door was opened.

Upon the threshold was a woman, clad in a man's livery, who bade her come below.

Aileen instinctively refused.

The servant disappeared.

A few minutes after a crowd of women, superbly dressed, invaded her prison.

"You must come with us," cried one.

"Yes, we will take no denial," shrieked another.

Aileen, dazed and unhappy, shrank away, but instantly she was surrounded.

No force was used, nor did they essay to drag her, but, in spite of herself, she felt herself borne by mere force of numbers from the room and down the stairs.

Laughing heartily, the women carried her along into a glare of light.

Her entrance was greeted by shouts of acclamation.

A strange picture she made in her plain, black dress amid this crowd of women in their silks and velvets and flashing jewels.

She passed her hand over her eyes, as if trying to rouse herself from some horrible dream.

Then before her she saw the beautiful, sneering face of the woman who had caused her and hers so much trouble, and recognized—Cynthia Dell.

With a smothered cry of horror, she turned to fly, but the Panther, her black eyes flashing with triumph, prevented her.

“Close the doors!” she cried, an order which was instantly obeyed. “Now she is here, she must do as others do.”

Aileen stood trembling, not able to flee, a white dove caught in the trap of the fowler.

Beatrice touched her on the arm reverently. The woman's sympathies were aroused.

“I'll see you through it,” she whispered.

Aileen glanced at the gorgeously attired woman, and, not understanding, involuntarily shrank away.

Beatrice understood, however, and, hurt though she was, murmured, encouragingly:

“Courage! courage!”

“Give her some wine!” said the Panther, eyeing the shrinking form with malevolence and a gloating triumph.

So might Messalina have viewed from the imperial, scarlet-covered seat, the girl who had dared to dispute with her one of her lovers, but who was now standing in the arena below, coweringly awaiting the approach of the wild beasts who were to tear her to pieces.

And there was no more relenting in the breast of Cynthia Dell than there was in the heart of the Roman Empress as she turned her thumb downward in token that no mercy was to be shown.

One of the women thrust a glass of champagne into Aileen's hand.

The girl took it mechanically, scarcely knowing what she was doing.

"Now drink!" commanded the Panther, her whole face illumined with unholy triumph. "Drink health to Aspasia or to me! Yes! To me! The queen of all who live for life, for pleasure, for happiness! A health to me, then!" with increasing excitement. "Prosperity to my subjects, Woman! And ruin to our enemy, Man!"

As the Panther spoke Aileen gradually realized the position in which she was placed. She grasped the situation and regained her native courage.

She stood there quietly, her black-robed figure erect, her eyes calm, her whole attitude that of the martyr, who, if she has to suffer, will at least suffer with dignity and fortitude.

"Come!" ejaculated Cynthia, savagely, enraged at the thought that, though she held this girl's body, she could not dominate her soul. "Drink, will you?"

Aileen's great, blue eyes met the flashing, threatening, black ones with calm defiance.

"Never!"

The Panther sprang forward, and, in an access of fury, grasped her by the wrist, sending the wine flying in a golden shower.

"What!" she breathed from behind her clinched teeth. "You shall! You must! Leave this to me," waving the others back, as they crowded forward. "You'll have to do it! My temper's up! You understand! Come, I'll give you one more chance! Now, health and prosperity to us all!"

But Aileen's glance never faltered. With her eyes still fixed upon the countenance of the Panther, infuriated and distorted with passion as it was, she answered, with calm deliberation:

"I'll die first!"

As she spoke she flung the glass from her, and it shivered into a thousand pieces upon the floor.

Cynthia started forward, her hands clinched as if to clutch the white throat of this girl who dared to defy her.

But, with a powerful effort, she restrained herself, and said, in a voice terrible in its suggestion of suppressed savagery:

"Be careful! You are in a strange company. Do you not tremble for your good self?"

"No! Why should I? I dread you, I loathe you, I pity you, but," bravely, "I'm not afraid of you."

"Bravo!" cried Beatrice, with an irrepressible impulse of admiration.

"Don't you interfere!" ejaculated the Panther, turning frenziedly upon her.

Beatrice, dismayed, shrank back.

Then, with a shrug of her shoulders, in a carelessness far more assumed than real, she hummed a tune from one of the comic operas then in vogue.

"Now for the last time," said Cynthia, to the girl, who, pale but determined, faced her without flinching. "Have you changed your mind?"

"No!" flinging back her head proudly. "Nothing will ever change it!"

"We shall see!" retorted the Panther, grimly.

Then she turned to her friends, who had been listening to this war of words with fascinated attention.

"Give me a glass!"

A dozen were extended to her.

She took one and advanced toward Aileen threateningly.

"Now!"

"Keep back!" cried the girl, all her blood on fire

and resolved never to yield. "Keep away from me! Don't dare to touch me!"

Maddened by this resistance, the Panther darted toward her, with eyes aflame.

Scarce knowing what she did, but with the instinct of self-preservation strong upon her, Aileen snatched a dagger from among the presents displayed on the table near her.

"Stand back!" she cried.

The tableau was a vivid one.

The young girl with the knife poised threateningly in her hand, and the woman, magnificent in her brocades and jewels cowering before her.

About them a murmur of voices rose and fell.

But still the girl stood there on the defensive, and the Panther faced her, half intimidated, half furious.

CHAPTER XIV.

WOMAN AGAINST WOMAN.

But, even when the game was in her own hands, Aileen flung away the knife with a shudder.

"Oh, no, no, no!" she cried, with a sudden revulsion of feeling. "I didn't mean that, but you drove me, you forced me to it. I'm sorry, very sorry. Now," moving toward the door, "let me leave this place!"

But the Panther sprang before her, barring her exit. She had no intention of allowing her victim to escape so easily.

"Oh, dear, no!" she exclaimed, her lips curled in a cynical smile.

"Why not?" demanded Aileen, indignantly, now thoroughly recovered from her first alarm, and determined to fight the matter out to the bitter end, even though the chances were against her fifty to one. "Why do you dare detain me? Let me go!"

"No!" replied the Panther, with arms outstretched to bar any egress.

"You must!"

Cynthia burst into satirical laughter. She was the mistress of the situation, and she knew it.

"Oh, must! Ha! ha! ha! Not a bit of it!"

Then Beatrice, who had been listening to the conversation with a longing to relieve the poor girl from the torture she knew she was undergoing, stepped forward.

"Come! come!" she said to Cynthia. "You are spoiling everything. Let the girl go!"

"I won't!" replied the Panther, emphatically. "And," turning upon the assembled company with a flash in her eyes that defied them to question the truth of her words, "and I'll tell you why! That pale-faced, innocent, trembling creature," flinging out her arm with a contemptuous gesture toward Aileen, "stole from me the man I loved, the man who loved me!"

"Oh!" went up the chorus from the assembled women, in a threatening murmur.

In their eyes this was the unforgivable sin.

"That is not true!" cried Aileen, understanding what she was accused of and revolted.

"Yes, it is!" asseverated the Panther. "Was it not through you that he was shot?"

"Indeed, no, no!"

"I say yes! for it was to spare your sickly blushes that Tom Chichester came between his brother and myself!"

The name of Tom restored Aileen to herself and gave her back the courage she so sadly needed.

"He tried to save him from you," she declared, facing bravely the woman in whose power she felt she was.

The others were listening in breathless silence, almost as if this were a scene upon the stage in which they had no part, but in which they were deeply interested.

The actors were this slender, dark-robed figure and the superb Panther.

Which would be the victor?

Cynthia moved a step forward, half resolved to use physical force and so establish her supremacy at once.

But, with compressed lips and glowing eyes, she restrained herself, resolving to use a weapon quite as deadly, though not so brutal.

"To save him, yes!" she retorted. "How? By what means? I'll tell you! He tried to save him by killing him!"

A cry of horror and repulsion broke from Aileen's pale lips.

"What! You dare accuse him of being a murderer!"

"Yes!" replied the Panther, stamping her foot viciously, "and it is the truth!"

She had reached a point when she cared but little what she said. Her one idea was, by fair means or foul to crush the heart of this girl who dared to defy her.

But this was not such an easy matter to do. Aileen's spirit—and when it came to the point, she was far from being deficient in bravery—was aroused.

"Then the man who loved you," she said, in clear, tense tones, "died with a lie upon his lips!"

"He did," returned Cynthia, knowing that she was speaking a lie, and yet caring nothing, so that she could conquer.

"And I say he did not!"

Aileen's figure was drawn up to its full extent, and her blue eyes were ablaze with indignation. All fear was vanished. For herself she cared nothing, but for her lover's good name she cared much, enough to brave any danger.

"He spoke the truth!" she went on, boldly. "Tom Chichester never sent his brother to death, but," extending her arm with the gesture of an accusing goddess, and pointing straight at the Panther, "but you did!"

In spite of all her superb aplomb, Cynthia was staggered at this direct accusation.

"I! I!" she faltered. "What do you mean?"

"This! that, though your hand may not have taken his life, you are morally his murderess!"

At this the women, who had been listening with breathless attention, started forward with threatening murmurs. An accusation against their acknowledged leader was an accusation against them all. And,

moreover, many of them were indebted to Cynthia, and many more of them hoped to be. It was the gratitude for favors to come which impelled them to stand by her, and this, a cynical, clever writer has declared, is the only genuine gratitude which exists.

It was a strange scene. The pure, sweet-faced girl who had known no evil, standing in the midst of these superbly dressed, bejeweled women who knew so well all that can be offered by "the world, the flesh, and the devil."

But Cynthia, who, in her indomitable pride, felt herself able to cope with any contingency that might arise, without outside help, turned with a commanding gesture to her friends.

"Silence!" she ordered, and the women fell back. And then turning toward Aileen, she repeated, with redoubled force: "Silence!"

But for once she had met her match.

"No!" cried Aileen, determined to defend the man she loved—and there is no courage equal to that of the woman who loves. "No! I will speak! I'm defending an innocent man from a wicked charge! And nothing can frighten me!" She paused a moment, and then went on, addressing Cynthia, who was speechless and trembling with rage. "When you met Harry Chichester, he was a boy with the world before him; he was weak, but he was not corrupted. Your mercenary hands took hold of him, and molded

him to what you wished. You ruined him, you drove him to sin, to a crime, for which another suffered. When you wrecked his life, and he was sinking, a brave man tried to rescue him, but he was too late, and you dragged him down!"

She stopped and looked about at the faces of the women who surrounded her. Young as she was, Aileen knew something of the wickedness of this world. Hers was not the purity of ignorance, which is often without safeguards, but the purity of the woman who knows the pitfalls of this world and how to avoid them. She understood clearly the character of the women about her, and with an irresistible impulse she addressed them.

"Not only has she done this, but all of you are doing it day by day. The past is past," her voice trembling with eagerness and divine pity, "but there is still time to break the ties that bind you to it. Then, stop, stop! before it is too late! Oh, women, women, think of your lives, and for God's sake, think of your deaths!"

She paused. Some of her hearers had buried their faces in their hands and were weeping silently. Others glared at her, angry, sullen, and threatening.

"You have courage, little one," murmured Beatrice Moreland, suppressing a sob.

The Panther caught the words. She was not one

of those who were moved by Aileen's impassioned appeal.

"Has she?" she cried, her scarlet lips curling in a sneering smile. "Has she? I'll test it, then!"

She advanced toward the girl, who, with her hands pressed to her bosom, was panting and breathless.

"I've some news for you!" she announced, with a savage intensity. "The murderer of Harry Chichester is known. The proofs have been found, and the warrant is out for his arrest!"

The effect of these words was all that Cynthia, who was watching with gloating expectation, could have wished.

Aileen turned pale as death.

"Arrest!" she gasped. "Tell me! Who is it?"

Believing that she held now the reins of victory in her hands, the Panther smiled derisively.

"As if you didn't know!" she replied, scornfully. "Why, your lover, of course."

With a low moan, Aileen staggered back, almost falling.

Beatrice, her kind heart filled with pity, started toward her, but the Panther, not to be balked of the enjoyment of the pain she was inflicting, sprang between.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, with a cruel, triumphant laugh. "I've brought you to your knees at last! The tears are scalding, are they not? Wait! They will

be bitterer still—when he is punished for his crime!”

Aileen dashed away her tears.

“That he will never be!” she cried, with the courage of conviction. “He is innocent, as innocent of this as he was of the forgery you forced his brother to——”

The Panther, her face convulsed with passion, made a movement as if she would spring upon her.

“What!” she interrupted, from between her clinched teeth, controlling with a powerful effort the desire to rend with her nails the face of this girl who dared to defy her, and whom her distorted imagination held to be the prime factor of all her troubles.

“What! You malign the dead, do you?”

Aileen flung up her head and met the blazing eyes of her accuser with a fearless glance.

“No!” she replied, proudly. “No! I defend the living!”

The Panther answered her with the slow, hard mockery of joyless laughter.

Aileen stood erect facing her. Her eyes were dilated with loathing and fear.

“Yes,” said Cynthia, at last, with suppressed passion, “you take up the cudgels for this man, my enemy, and the blows you deal me are too heavy for my endurance.”

Aileen was now quite herself again. The blood rushed to her face in a bright flood. Her whole form

grew instinct with strength and pride, which was, however, destined, alas! to be but short-lived.

“But——” she began.

“Silence!” interrupted Cynthia, her eyes glittering with a still more sinister and savage meaning from under the heavy, black-fringed lids. “Silence! And hear me out! I hate you! Have always hated you! But I do not blame you in this! You fight for the love you have, but I, also—I shall fight for the love I have lost!” In the intensity of her feeling she struck her hand heavily upon the table, making the presents dance. “What, will you do for that love? Tell me, will you risk your life for it? *I will mine!*”

As she spoke, mad with ungovernable passion, she snatched up, with a stifled cry, the pistols with which Beatrice had presented her.

“See! see!” she cried. “Here are the means! We will decide this as men decide their quarrels. Take one! They are loaded! Take one, I say, take one!”

She tried to force one of the pistols into Aileen’s hand, but the latter, now thoroughly frightened, shrank back in dismay. All her new-born courage deserted her. Her face grew suddenly white as death. A sickly feeling of faintness overpowered her, and she pressed one hand to her heart unconsciously.

“No! no!” she faltered, through ashen lips. “You are wicked!”

But all the worst side of the Panther’s nature was

roused. She was longing for vengeance, and she was not to be balked of its satisfaction.

"You won't! Coward!" she hissed.

And then, beside herself, she rushed forward, with hand upraised, as if to strike the object of her rage and hatred.

But, quick as an arrow from the bow, a woman's form darted between, and catching the threatening hand in a nervous grasp, flung it violently backward.

"Don't dare to touch her!" rang out a shrill voice, as Beatrice Moreland, all her better instincts to the fore, faced unflinchingly the savage woman.

The others bent forward, intent upon the exciting scene before them.

None paid any attention to Aileen, who, her overwrought nerves giving way, staggered and fell back in an unconscious condition upon the sofa, which chanced to be just behind her and so broke her fall.

For an instant the Panther was dumfounded by this unexpected intervention.

"You! you!" she gasped.

But Beatrice, with a jeering laugh, fearlessly held her ground.

"Yes, I!" she returned, in clear, ringing tones. "You want revenge for your dead one, eh? Well, you shall have it. Not from her! But from me!"

"From you?"

"Yes! Don't I speak plainly? Give me one of those!"

She pointed suddenly at the pistols, which the Panther still held in her grasp, while the women who were witnesses of the scene held their breath in suspense.

Cynthia, with more amazement than anything else upon her face, involuntarily drew away the weapons.

"First——"

"Ask me no questions!" interrupted Beatrice, fiercely, flushed with wine and indignation. "I will not tell you my reasons! They are in my heart! Give me one, I say!" And, with a sudden, quick movement, she wrenched one of the pistols from Cynthia's grasp. "Ah!" with a cry of exultation and a swift wave of her hand toward Aileen's unconscious form, "you wanted to kill this child! Well, I take her place. Kill *me* if you can!"

The other guests were now thoroughly frightened. Some of them began to wring their hands, sobbing and shrieking impotently, while others, more clear-headed, started forward to prevent the impending tragedy.

One of them caught from behind the hand of Beatrice which held the pistol.

Beatrice, feeling the grasp, gave her arm a wrench to free herself.

As she did so the pistol exploded.

The Panther uttered a loud cry and fell forward upon her face.

Seeing what had happened, Beatrice, shocked into soberness, stood panic-stricken.

From the others shrieks and screams of horror rent the air, mingled with incoherent exclamations.

"Let's get away!"

"The police will be here!"

"Quick! quick!"

The yellow-haired girl and one or two of the others who were least overcome by the prevalent mad alarm, seized Beatrice, who was standing like a statue with her eyes fixed in a glassy stare upon the prostrate form of the woman she had accidentally wounded, perhaps killed.

"Come away, Beatrice! Come away! Save yourself. Quick!"

"What have I done? What have I done?" was the moaning response.

"Come, will you?"

"She is dead! She is dead!"

At this moment a distant police whistle was heard. The cries of the women had undoubtedly alarmed the watchman on his beat.

Instantly there was a general stampede for the doors. It was each one for herself.

The yellow-haired girl by main force dragged Beatrice away.

The two unconscious women were left alone in the scene of the recent revels.

In the frantic retreat a large standing lamp had been overturned, and the burning oil was stealing across the floor toward some lace draperies that veiled one of the windows.

Unless help were soon forthcoming, the villa and its helpless inmates were doomed to destruction.

Suddenly Aileen moved and opened her eyes. With an effort, she raised herself to a sitting posture and gazed about her in a dazed way, not realizing at first where she was.

Then a remembrance of all that had happened to her flashed back upon her, and with a weak cry, she rose to her feet.

Meanwhile the flames had caught the curtains and were already licking the frame-work. One tiny thread of fire was stealing across the floor toward the long train of the Panther, who lay there face downward.

A choking, deadly smoke was rapidly filling the room.

Aileen staggered to her feet, and then, as with her returning senses, she understood the condition of affairs, she screamed aloud a wild appeal for help.

The place was in flames! She was lost!

But no! Just at that moment there was a ringing cheer from the balcony. The windows were dashed inward, and Aileen heard a voice exclaiming, "My

darling! my darling!" and felt a pair of strong arms encircling her.

Then consciousness left her, and she knew no more.

CHAPTER XV.

ATONEMENT.

It was late in the afternoon, about six weeks after the events narrated in the last chapter.

The sun was sinking behind the roofs of London and poured its golden radiance into a plainly but comfortably furnished room in the third story of a private hospital near Waterloo Bridge.

Before one of the windows, in a low chair, propped up with pillows, reclined Cynthia Dell, but sadly changed from the gorgeous Panther of a few weeks before. Her face was thin, pale, and haggard, and marked with more than one ugly scar.

While Aileen had been rescued unharmed, though in the very nick of time, from the fire which had destroyed the villa at Highgate, Cynthia had been less fortunate. The flames had already reached her when the firemen managed to bear her fainting form from the burning room, and she was badly, though not fatally, injured.

To-day she was sitting up for the first time, and the doctors had pronounced her out of danger, although she would probably never be again the vigor-

ous woman of the past, and her beauty was ruined forever.

During all her illness she had been faithfully attended by her maid, Rose, and another, Aileen Millar, with divine forgiveness, had come to help nurse and care for the woman who had been her bitterest enemy.

Aileen had much trouble and anxiety of her own to bear in those days.

After the fire, and when he was assured of his sweetheart's safety and that no lives had been lost, Tom Chichester had kept his word to Inspector Clarkson and accompanied that official to prison.

After the bravery displayed by Tom, the inspector had more doubts than ever as to the young man's guilt, but, in view of the evidence his duty was clear, and, in spite of himself, he was obliged to commit him on the charge of having murdered his brother.

The trial was now close at hand. Gillespie Fletcher, who had been engaged as Tom's chief counsel, had thrown himself heart and soul into the case, and Clarkson had given him every aid in his power.

But the fact still remained that the outlook was very black for poor Tom; the evidence was clearly against him.

The one witness from whom much had been hoped apparently had nothing to testify.

Fretly Burnsides had been rescued from the burn-

ing house, and rescued, moreover, by Tom himself. But, when questioned by Fletcher and Clarkson, he declared that he knew nothing whatever of the crime, and was out of his head when he wrote that note to Tom. In spite of every influence brought to bear upon him, he rigidly and obstinately adhered to this statement.

It was not strange that the hearts of the prisoner's relatives and friends grew cold within them at the thought of the possible outcome of the trial.

All this Cynthia Dell knew, and had been thinking of as she lay back there in front of the window.

Suddenly she moved, as if shaking off some unpleasant and besieging thought, and called, faintly:

"Rose!"

The maid, who had been busy at the other side of the room, came hastily forward.

"Yes, madame."

"Miss Millar has not come yet?"

"No, madame. She said this morning, however, that she would be back again before evening."

"What an angel she is! Rose, you sent that telegram?"

"Yes, more than an hour ago."

An expression of relief passed over Cynthia's scarred face.

"That's all. Leave me, Rose. I want to be alone."

As the door closed behind the maid, Cynthia pain-

fully rose to her feet and leaned against the side of the window.

The light of the setting sun fell full upon the golden cross which stands, a sign of mercy, on the dome of St. Paul's.

For a brief moment Cynthia smiled, and then she shivered, and, as if blinded by the glory, hurriedly pulled the curtains in front of the window.

Her effort brought on a fit of coughing. Weak and exhausted, she leaned back against the wall, just as the door opened and a woman entered the room.

She hurried toward Cynthia and gently and tenderly helped her to her chair.

Cynthia looked up with a faint smile.

"Ah, Beatrice, is it you?"

The last few weeks had wrought a change in Beatrice Moreland as well. Her flashy attire was gone, to be replaced by garments of sober hue and make; and her face was guiltless of rouge and powder.

"Are you no better?" she asked, anxiously, leaning over the invalid.

"Yes, a little."

"How," nervously, "how is the wound?"

"The one you gave me?"

Beatrice winced, but in an instant Cynthia touched her kindly on the arm to show that the speech had not been intended to give pain.

"By accident, of course! Oh, that is well, quite

well. But the other, the one here," placing her hand upon her heart, "nothing can cure."

"How good of you to say it was an accident!" replied Beatrice, with genuine gratitude.

"Bah! my dear," retorted the Panther, with a dash of her old fire. "Think of the nuisance of the police court!"

"It was good of you, nevertheless."

Cynthia raised her eyes, those eyes which were still as magnificent as ever, and gave her companion one keen, scrutinizing look.

"Beatrice," she said, slowly, "come closer. I have something to say to you."

Beatrice knelt down by her side.

"I am going to die!"

"Cynthia! No! you are better!"

"Hush! Better or not, I am going to die!" was the answer, in a tone that filled her listener with vague horror and foreboding. "What is there to live for now? The only one I love is dead, and I am forgotten. My beauty is gone, my worshipers have deserted me, and another sits upon my throne."

"And all through me!" said Beatrice, sobbing. "I wish I could make amends."

"You can!" ejaculated Cynthia, with sudden determination.

She raised herself slowly to her feet and dragged

herself across the room to a table containing writing materials.

For a moment she supported herself against it, and then, opening a drawer, she took out a paper.

"I want you to be a witness to this," she said to Beatrice, who had followed her wonderingly. "It is a confession of a crime for which another may suffer."

"What!"

"Hush! Say nothing, whatever you may suspect. See, I sign it in your presence. Now you."

Beatrice had turned very white, guessing as she had a portion of the truth, but she took the pen extended to her, and, with a trembling hand, appended her signature.

There was a strange look upon Cynthia's face, a look of mingled pain and relief, as she folded the paper and placed it in the bosom of her lace-trimmed wrapper.

"Thank you!" she said, with a heavy sigh. And then, with a quick transition, she added, with a sort of feverish gayety: "Ah, Beatrice, we have done one good deed at last. Ha! ha! We who have done so many guilty. And now, my friend, leave me to myself. No, stay a moment."

She took a small jewel-case from the table and offered it to her companion.

"Take this. There are still a few jewels left."

But Beatrice waved away the box.

“No! no!” she declared, with peremptory decision.
“I’ll not touch them, Cynthia!”

The matter was not pressed.

“As you will,” replied Cynthia, indifferently, replacing the box and sinking down wearily upon a couch which stood near. “Good-by, Beatrice.”

“Good-by, Cynthia,” her eyes filling with tears.
“I am going away. I lead a life like my past no longer. The sin of London stifles me, and I long for a sight of the flowers. To-morrow I start for Devon to see if my mother is still alive. When you are better, for you will not die,” with a confidence she did not inwardly feel, “write and say you’ll come to me. We’ll be so happy together!”

“It is very good of you,” replied Cynthia, gently, almost affectionately. “I hope you will find your mother. But—we shall never meet again. Good-by.”

“Good-by! I am forgiven?”

“Yes! yes!”

Beatrice stooped over and kissed the poor, white face. Then, with a choking at her throat and a mist before her eyes, she hurried from the room.

The Panther—although it seems unkind to call her the Panther now, so softened had she become—lay back upon the lounge for a time, staring at the firelight.

Then, with a slow, deliberate movement, she drew a ring from her finger. It was a ring that had been

given her long ago by an admirer, who had purchased it in Florence.

She pressed a tiny spring, and the jewel which was the ring's chief ornament flew back.

"How sweet it smells!" she thought to herself, as she raised it to her nostrils. "Like the almond trees in spring!"

Then, shuddering, she closed the ring with a snap. No! The time, although approaching, had not yet come. The cry for justice which arose from the grave which she and others had dug, had yet to be answered. The blame was hers. Well, she had taken all the blame. She had told all, and yet, no, not quite all. She had spared Gridston. It was she who had prompted him, it was she who was guilty.

She threw up her arms with a wild, appealing gesture.

"Heaven knows my punishment!" she murmured, aloud. "My remorse has been a heavy one. Thank Heaven, it will soon be over!"

She put the ring back upon her finger, as the door opened and Rose appeared.

"He is here, madame!"

Cynthia uttered a slight cry and sank back, half fainting, upon the cushions.

"Give me some drink, Rose! Brandy!"

Rose obeyed.

The stimulant roused her mistress and gave her the

strength and courage she knew she would need in the forthcoming interview.

“Bring him here!”

In another moment the wronged husband and the erring wife were face to face.

Burnsides came close to the couch, and Cynthia raised herself upon her elbow.

For a moment they looked fixedly at each other. The man's gaze, which at first had been stern and hard, gradually relaxed.

Then Cynthia spoke.

“It was kind of you to come,” she murmured.

“You sent for me,” replied Burnsides, in a hollow voice. “It was my duty.”

Cynthia threw her head back upon the cushions and laughed hysterically. She was not so strong, either mentally or physically, as she had been.

“Ha! ha! ha! Do we always do our duty, we two?”

Burnsides came a step nearer. The change in his wife affected him powerfully. He half stretched forth his arms, but his dry lips and parched tongue refused him utterance.

Gradually the Panther's unnatural merriment died away.

“How were you saved that dreadful night?” she asked.

With a mighty effort, Burnsides replied, with difficulty:

"Through Tom Chichester. He knew I was a prisoner in the house, and he rescued me at the risk of his life."

Cynthia shivered. He, Tom Chichester, had saved the lives of both, she the wife, he the husband. Verily, truth was stranger than fiction.

But—atonement was to come.

"He is to be tried to-morrow, is he not?" she asked, forcing herself to be calm.

"Yes, to-morrow."

"And—will they find him guilty?"

Burnsides fixed his burning eyes upon her. He thought he knew the truth.

"The evidence is heavy against him," he replied, slowly. "I fear he will be condemned."

Cynthia started, her cheeks flushing and her eyes on fire.

"He shall not be condemned!" she cried.

"Cynthia!" gasped Burnsides, in terrible alarm, confident that he understood.

"I tell you, he must be saved!" with an intensity and strength born of an inward determination which dominated her physical weakness.

"What!"

Cynthia rose from the couch, and with an uncon-

scious but powerful effort of will, drew her figure up to its full height.

“And you must do it!”

Burnsides started back.

“You forget, Cynthia. I am your husband. My lips are sealed!”

For an instant she stared at him, and then a realization of what he meant overpowering her, she tottered toward him.

“My God! You believe what I told you!”

He caught her in his arms and drew her tenderly toward him.

“I not only believe, but I know.”

“What!”

“I saw everything.”

“You——”

“I was not so injured as you thought. I was trying to leave by the balcony, when I saw you and Gridston there. I watched and was a witness to it all.”

Cynthia wrenched herself from his arms.

“And you kept silent for my sake?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because,” in a choking voice, “because I loved my wife.”

If he had but known it, his wife was never so near loving him as she was then.

"Besides," he went on, "the man who died had done me a deadly wrong. It was he," with concentrated bitterness, "who brought this crime upon you, and he deserved his fate."

But at this, Cynthia thrust forth her hands in negation, with a cry of horrified denial.

"No! no! no! You are wrong. We loved each other. No more! Harry Chichester was not to blame! I swear it!"

There was an accent of truth in her voice which forced Burnsides to believe her. And yet, if not Harry Chichester, who was it?

"That is why I wanted you to come," went on Cynthia, feverishly, her excitement lending her a false strength. "You sent a letter to Tom Chichester by Amos, the valet—oh, don't deny it; Rose has told me all—a letter saying that you knew the murderer of his brother?"

"Yes," assented Burnsides, after a pause.

He was bewildered, and yet he longed to know the truth.

"Why?" asked Cynthia.

"Because it was my only way to escape! But," with immense emphasis, "I should never have spoken! I never have! I never will!"

"You must! To-morrow you must tell everything!"

"You forget——"

"Nothing!" she interrupted, imperiously. "To-morrow you will have no wife!"

Burnsides started. With quivering lips he attempted to speak, but his wife checked him with a gesture.

"It is true! That wound, you know, I feel it now, always!"

With a weakness, half assumed, half real, she sank down upon the couch.

"Let me get help!" exclaimed Burnsides, in alarm.

"No! no!" she answered, thrusting her hand in her bosom and drawing forth the paper which she and Beatrice had both signed. "Here is the confession of everything. To-morrow you will carry it to the court and save him. Take it! Take it!" Burnsides took the paper. "But remember, you are not to use it until to-morrow. You are to say nothing until I am at rest! Promise me!"

"I promise."

With a deep sigh, Cynthia sank back, her fictitious strength exhausted.

"You'll keep your word, I know," she murmured, faintly. "And, Fretly, before you go, can you forgive me for the shame I have brought upon you, for the life I have spoiled?"

Surely never before had the haughty Panther spoken in so humble, so appealing a tone.

Burnsides leaned over her, all his unconquerable love for her welling up in his heart.

"I love my wife," he said, with infinite, unconscious pathos. "Is that enough?"

A suspicious moisture gathered in the Panther's eyes. She raised her arms and drew his head down upon her breast.

In that moment all was forgiven.

* * * * *

"May I come in?"

Cynthia raised her head.

Her husband had been gone now some quarter of an hour. She had sent him away from her, promising that he should see her to-morrow.

But to-morrow, would she see him?

Ah! of that she had said nothing.

It was Aileen Millar who had asked permission to enter.

Without waiting for any answer, the young girl crossed the room and knelt down by Cynthia's side.

"Are you better to-night?" she asked, gently.

"Better than I have ever been," was the reply, the great dark eyes bent yearningly, even tenderly, upon the sweet face before them, "since you saved my life by your nursing."

"Don't speak of that!"

"I must. Believe me, I am not ungrateful, as you will find?"

"As I shall find?" repeated Aileen, struck by the significance of the tone in which the words were spoken.

"Yes. Miss Millar, in the cottage where I was born, over my little cot, my mother once placed the text, 'Wait and hope!' "

" 'Wait and hope!' " echoed Aileen, with an involuntary thrill.

"Yes. It was good of you to come to-night with all your trouble."

"Oh, don't speak of that!" her heart contracting with the fear that had been ever-present with her during all these long, weary weeks. "It is awful to think of only a few hours more and it will be life or death for the man I love."

Cynthia half raised herself and, stretching forth her hand, laid it encouragingly upon the head of the girl kneeling beside her couch.

"Hope!" she cried.

"Ah!" with a moan. "They tell me there is none."

There was silence for a moment, and then Cynthia said, in a voice trembling with emotion, longing to cheer the poor girl, and yet not daring to say all that she might:

"There is always Hope—even for me, perhaps, *perhaps*. But, listen. I am ill, very ill. All your good-

ness and nursing cannot save me. But you will be rewarded for it."

She bent forward and reverently touched her sin-stained lips to the girl's pure forehead; and a tear rolled down her cheek and rested like a diamond upon Aileen's bright hair.

In that moment Cynthia Dell, the Panther, was nearer being genuine and true than she had ever been in her life.

"There!" sinking back again, and feebly motioning Aileen away, as if, even in that supreme moment, as she knew it to be, a little ashamed of her weakness. "There! I am tired!"

"Shall I light the lamp?" asked Aileen, rising.

"No! I want to sleep! To sleep!" she repeated, with an odd, pathetic wistfulness. "But if you would, sing what you sang to me yesterday. Good-night! Good-by! Don't wake me. Remember, wait, and hope!"

Aileen went over in the gloaming to a cottage piano which stood in one of the corners of the room, and shortly her sweet voice was raised in one of the loveliest of all melodies, "The Land o' the Leal!"

Cynthia listened for a moment, with a peculiar smile. Then, she touched the spring of the ring.

"God forgive me all my sins!" she murmured, almost inaudibly.

Then, with a firm hand, she raised the ring to her lips.

Softly the voice of the singer went on, but the soul of Cynthia Dell had passed to the judgment seat of Him who once forgave her, whose name of Magdalen has since become that of all her erring sisters.

CHAPTER XVI.

WAITING FOR THE VERDICT.

The trial of Thomas Chichester for the murder of his brother was nearly over.

For two days it had dragged along its slow length, days of unspeakable torture to those whose future happiness depended upon the verdict to be given by "those twelve good men and true."

And yet, although for very different reasons, perhaps among all of the spectators of the trial of this case, none was more deeply interested than the man who styled himself "Captain" Gridston.

This was quite natural. Why should not the man of all others who was most conversant with the true state of affairs, the man who had most reason to be afraid of his neck, watch the progress of the case with the most intense attention? Tom Chichester condemned, he was safe; Tom Chichester acquitted, and the police again would be on the track of the murderer.

And, there were at least two, perhaps three, who knew who the real criminal was.

Gridston had been to the hospital several times to

see Cynthia, but the latter had invariably refused to see him, an incident which was calculated to increase rather than lessen his agitation.

Treacher, too, was a man that he had good reason to fear, but Treacher could be bought.

The first day of the trial the testimony was all against the prisoner, and Gridston was correspondingly elated.

But the second day things seemed to be changed. There was much which was in favor of Chichester, and Gridston, unable to remain longer, left the court-room, to wander aimlessly about the gardens of St. Paul's Cathedral, which were close at hand.

For once his nerve was gone. There was something wrong, what he did not know, and the anxiety was terrible.

He walked back and forth, back and forth, not knowing what to expect. He had left Treacher in the court-room, telling him to come to him at once, if any startling development should occur in the progress of the trial.

At last, after an hour or two, although it seemed years to the man who was waiting in an agony of suspense, the lawyer appeared.

"Thank goodness I've found you!" exclaimed Treacher hurrying toward him and clutching Gridston's arm in his excitement. "Get away as soon as

you can. You'd better go into the cathedral, for they'll never think of looking for you there."

Gridston turned pale as death, and certainly the words were sufficient to cause him fright.

"Why," he stammered, breathlessly. "What's the matter?"

"Everything!" replied Treacher, emphatically, and Gridston's heart turned cold with fear. "Burnsides has come to the court with a confession signed by his wife and witnessed, telling everything."

"Everything!" gasped Gridston, staggering back.

"I think so. That's all I can say. The judge, too, has received Burnsides' own statement as evidence. Chichester may be set free and a warrant out against you in no time."

Gridston shook as if stricken by an attack of palsy.

"My God!" he ejaculated, in fear and horror. "What's to be done?"

He was utterly unequal to decide for himself, and for once the lawyer, who in this case at least had not much to dread, was the stronger man.

"Do what I tell you! Get inside the church. I'll let you know the result, and, if the worst comes to the worst, I'll find a way out for you if I can."

Gridston tried to pull himself together, but, now in the hour of danger, all his inherent cowardice came to the fore. He could neither reason nor act. All that he could do was to follow the lawyer's ad-

vice, murmuring, weakly, a result of what he had long ago determined upon:

"If the worst comes to the worst, I know a way out of it myself."

He moved away with a tottering step and disappeared within one of the side doors of the cathedral.

Treacher shrugged his shoulders. It was not much to him, and yet, with the honor which is said to obtain among thieves, he did not care, if he could do anything to prevent it, to see one of his pals brought to justice.

He turned away to return to the court-room, but, as he did so, he saw coming toward him certain people, whom he did not care to meet. With a quick movement, he darted round the corner of the church just as Fletcher, accompanied by Aileen Millar and Gracie Chichester, came up the flagged pathway.

The trial was practically ended, and the jury had retired to consult upon the verdict. Aileen, whose nerves had been terribly shaken, had begged Gillie to take her out into the open air during the enforced period of waiting.

The discovery, after she had finished her song that afternoon in the hospital, that Cynthia Dell was dead, had been a terrible shock, and, immediately on top of that, had come the maddening anxiety of Tom's trial. That she had kept up as well as she had was a marvel.

The trio paused near one of the side entrances of St. Paul's.

"You must really brace up, both of you," said Gillie, with all the cheerfulness he could assume. To the young attorney's credit, it must be said that he had done everything in his power to save his client and had made really a brilliant fight. "I sincerely think, so far as a lawyer can give his opinion, that Tom will be acquitted."

Aileen raised her beautiful, sad eyes to his face.

"Whatever happens," she said, tremulously, but earnestly, "I can never thank you enough. No one could have pleaded more strongly and brilliantly for a brother's life."

Gillie flushed beneath these words of praise.

"Well—you see——" he stammered, "it's my first brief. I had to do my best, don't you know! I don't know what they'll say at my leaving the court. I must get back as soon as possible."

"It was very kind of you to bring me here," said Aileen, with a longing, shuddering glance at the gloomy building they had just left. "I couldn't have staid in that terrible place another moment. Oh!" clasping her hands passionately together. "To think that my darling's life rests in the hands of those men!"

"It will be all right," declared Gillie, with a confidence he did not wholly feel. "The old cockalorum

—I beg his pardon—the judge is a brick. No one could have summed up more in dear Tom's favor, unless I'd done it myself."

His efforts to cheer the anguish-tortured girl, however, were in vain. It is doubtful if she even heard what he said. Her eyes were fixed upon that gray building, whence was to come to her the dictum of life or death.

Gracie gently put her arm about her cousin's waist.

"Do go inside, darling," she murmured, imploringly, "and we will come to you soon, with good news, I verily believe."

Aileen sighed, and allowed herself to be persuaded.

"I couldn't go back to the court," she said, with a sob. "The sight of his poor pale face made my heart stand still. Yes," turning toward the church, its open doors ready to receive all those whose hearts were heavy laden with sorrow. "Yes, here is His house. I'll go in and pray for him, my Tom. I know that our Father in heaven will not desert us now. Oh, merciful God! Have pity! Have pity!"

Her eyes raised to the sky and her lips trembling in passionate supplication, she moved away with tottering steps and disappeared within the cathedral.

"And she calls herself common clay," muttered Gillie, his eyes filling with tears. "She is an angel, if ever there was one."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Gracie, a spasm of jealousy

seizing her, even in that moment of supreme anxiety.

“And how about me?”

“Oh! you! You are two angels,” replied her lover, diplomatically.

A faint smile crossed Gracie’s face. She was entirely appeased by the compliment, absurd as it was.

“But tell me, Gillie,” she said, her thoughts reverting again to her brother’s peril. “Tell me the truth. Do you think they can convict him?”

Fletcher hesitated a moment, and then answered, truthfully:

“There’s no telling, dear. A British jury is so confoundedly—hem!—intelligent nowadays, there’s no telling what they’d do. For my part, I’d rather trust to the old cockalorum. Come, let’s go back.”

They turned back to the court, and, as they did so, Treacher emerged from his concealment and followed them. After all, he reflected, it was well that he should be where he would receive the very first news of the verdict.

But just as he was about to turn the corner he came face to face with another two of Tom’s friends, who, humble as they were, were devoted heart and soul to the falsely accused man—Jim Palfrey and his little sweetheart, Becky Vetch.

“Good-day, Mr. Treacher,” said Palfrey, as he almost stumbled against the lawyer and with a politeness so exaggerated that it was scarcely less than an

insult. "I don't think they're going to convict him, eh?"

Treacher shrugged his shoulders, and an evil smile played about his mouth, a smile which made Becky long to fasten her two hands tightly about his neck.

"It's hard to say," he said, slowly. "The law is so uncertain. It's a very sad case. Two jealous brothers, angry words, sudden blows, the results awful. He is guilty, no doubt!"

Becky's eyes flashed.

"Do you think so?" she cried, angrily. "I don't! And you be careful, or there'll be another sad case!"

"Yes," added Palfrey, advancing in so threatening a manner that the attorney was completely cowed. "It will be two men this time, too—a cabman and a lawyer. Difference of opinion, angry words, lots of swearing, sudden blows, awful results! The collapse of the lawyer and the triumph of the cabman!"

Treacher made no reply. But, evidently considering discretion the better part of valor, he turned and made off, at a pace too rapid to be consistent with dignity.

Jim Palfrey, his honest face flushed with indignation, made a movement as if to follow, but Becky caught him by the arm.

"Let him go, Jim," she said. "He's not worth minding. Let's go inside the church, find Miss Millar, and cheer her up a bit."

"Better wait, Becky," replied Jim. "The law is so uncertain. Halloa!" suddenly. "Here's Inspector Clarkson! Wonder what he wants here!"

The tall form of the police agent, followed by two men, who were policemen in plain clothes, came toward them with quick, firm step.

"Hallos, Palfrey!" exclaimed Clarkson, as he came within speaking distance. "Seen anything of Gridston?"

The inspector knew all about Palfrey, and was confident that he was a man to be trusted, or else he would probably not have put this question.

"No," replied Jim, "but I've seen his creature—Treacher, I mean. And when the jackal is hard by, the bigger beast can't be far off."

"And he isn't, I'm sure," put in Becky, eagerly. "I am almost positive, as we came down the steps of the court, that I saw Captain Gridston sneaking into the church."

"Thank you, my dear."

The inspector, motioning his men to follow, moved away.

As soon as he was out of ear-shot, he turned to one of them and said, in a sharp, though low tone of command.

"Have all the doors watched! We won't take him inside! That would be too big an honor!"

CHAPTER XVII.

LIGHT AT LAST.

The trial was over.

The jury had given its verdict, a verdict which had been almost a foregone conclusion; and Tom Chichester, thanks to the tardy awakening of the Panther's conscience and the consequent testimony of Fretly Burnside, was a free man.

As he left the dock, Gracie flung herself into his arms, and Gillie Fletcher, his honest blue eyes shining with a suspicious moisture, grasped him warmly by the hand.

But Tom's glance sought in vain for the one of all others who was dearer to him than all else upon earth. Aileen's sweet face, with the love and trust shining in her beautiful eyes, had been his chief support and comfort during the long, weary, anxious hours of the trial, and now that all was happily ended, she was not there to greet him.

"Where is she?" he asked.

Gracie understood and answered as well as her emotion would permit her.

"She has gone into St. Paul's, there to wait and pray."

"Shall I bring her to you?" asked Gillie.

"No, no," replied Tom, quickly. "I will go to her."

Followed by his sister and Fletcher, he made his way out of the crowded court-room, not without difficulty, however, as there were many who desired to congratulate him upon his escape from an unjust accusation.

At last, however, the trio found themselves hurrying up the broad flagging that led to the side entrance of the cathedral.

At the door stood Inspector Clarkson, who caught Tom's hand in a crushing clasp. The kind-hearted police officer was genuinely delighted at the result of the trial, for he had formed a strong attachment for the young man he had been forced to arrest.

Tom thanked the inspector, and then motioning the others to wait for him, he entered the Cathedral alone.

There was a special service going on, a service for the benefit of the various charity schools. There were boys in knee-breeches with pewter badges on their coats, and little girls in blue and orange with quaint little white mob caps and white sleeves covering their arms.

Tom, as he entered, stood for a moment irresolute, his eyes wandering in search of Aileen.

Coming as he did, however, into the comparatively dim light of the sacred place, he could not at first distinguish her. But there was a man, lurking behind the pillars, who saw him with feelings of unmitigated horror and affright.

This man was Gridston, and, as he recognized Tom, he knew at once that the jury must have brought in a verdict of "Not guilty," and that consequently his own neck was in danger.

There was no time to be lost, and at once he glided out of the church, only, as he emerged, however, to feel the heavy hand of Inspector Clarkson upon his shoulder, and in another moment, before he could offer any resistance, the steel bracelets were clasped firmly about his wrists.

Meanwhile Tom had discovered Aileen, upon her knees and with bent head, in the rear of the church.

He softly approached her and knelt reverently at her side.

"My darling!" he whispered, softly.

Aileen raised her head and looked at him. Then, as she realized all that his presence meant, her whole being thrilled with joy. Her hand slipped into his, and the two, speechless with rapture, sent up a fervent prayer of thanksgiving for the happiness vouchsafed to them.

The sun, which had been obscured by clouds during the day, burst forth from its prison, and, through one of the windows, poured forth a flood of golden radiance upon the kneeling figures of the lovers, a gracious omen of the happy days in store for those two faithful hearts.

[THE END.]

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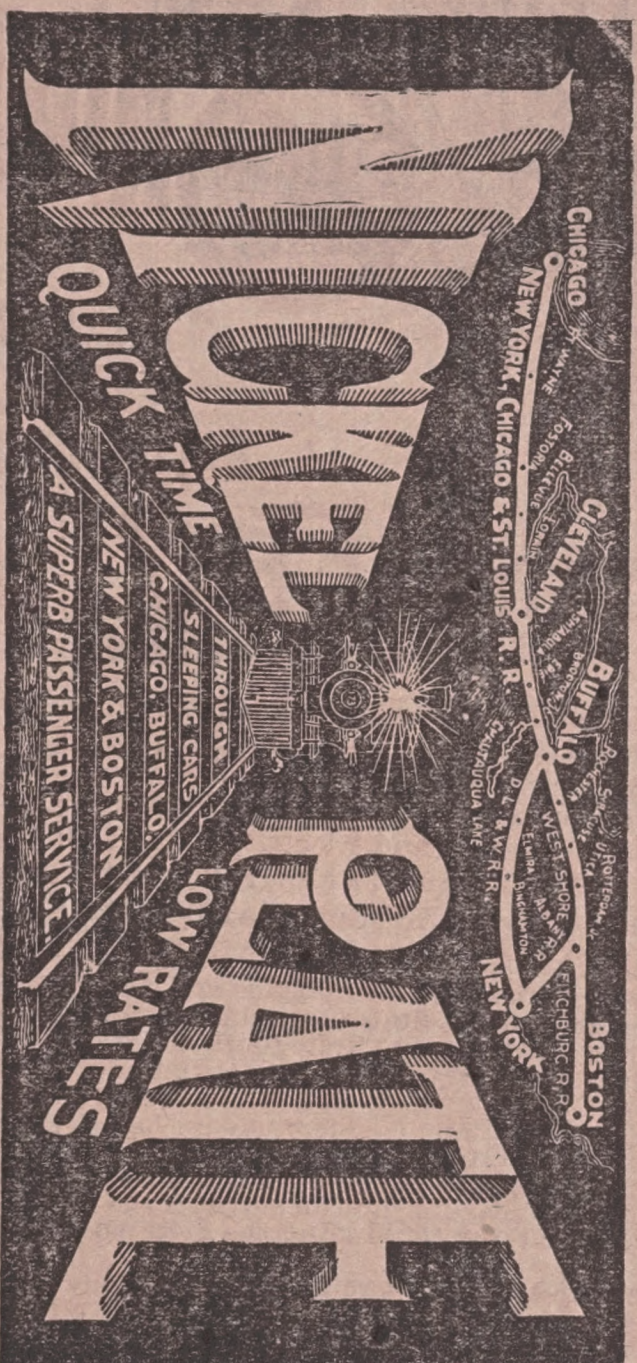
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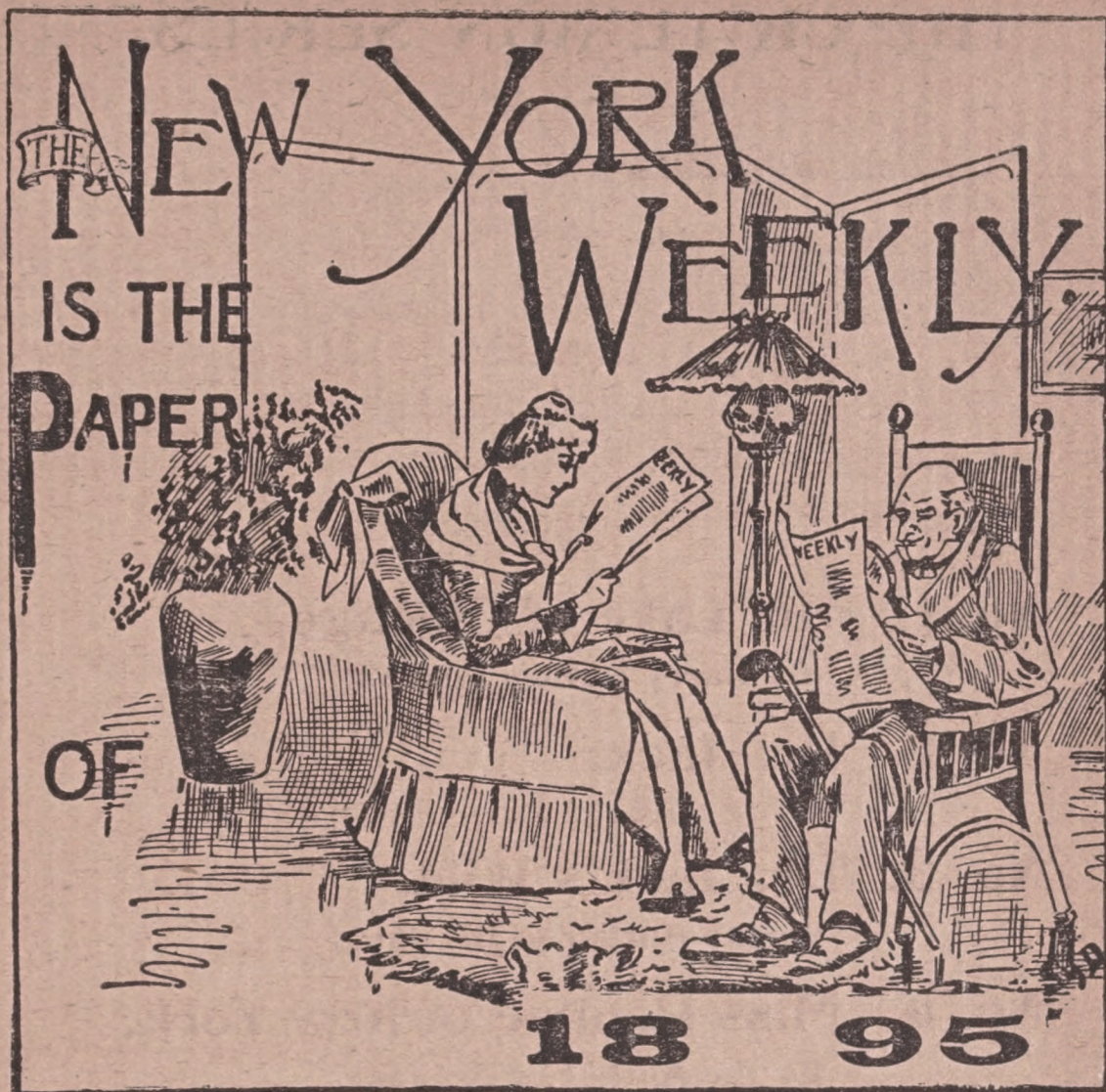
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